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NICK CARTER WEEKLY

THE MAN WITH THE MISSING THUMB

BELCHER WENT CAREFULLY DOWN THE LADDER WHICH HUNG WITH HIS WEIGHT FROM THE MUSCULAR HANDS OF THE DISGUISED DETECTIVE
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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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THE MAN WITH THE MISSING THUMB

OR,

NICK CARTER'S CHANCE DISCOVERY.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

"BY THE NAME OF MURCHISTON."

"And that is the place he was shot in—that Chinese joint yonder. The end of as smart a man as ever I knew. Horrible; eh?"

The speaker was a well-groomed and fashionably dressed man of middle age, and his companion seemed equally out of place in the squalor of Pell Street, in New York's Chinatown.

It was afternoon, however, and only a few shuffling Chinese were in evidence, with now and then a furtive white person hurrying through the glaring sunlight. The couple stood a moment before the door of a restaurant which bore, besides a sign in Chinese characters, the name of the proprietor, "Nam Wing."

The second stranger asked a question, and the speaker continued:

"That is true. He had nobody but himself to blame, had Murchiston. He had every advantage that education could give a man. He had a small, but comfortable, income. His grandmother started him in business twice, but Murchiston frittered his chances away."

"He believed he should have been somebody. He always claimed to be 'the lost heir' you read about in storybooks."

"I don't read storybooks," rejoined the other gravely. "But I know what you mean. He was visionary."

"I'm not so sure that it was a vision," said the second speaker.

"How's that?"

"Poor Murchiston had more money than was good for him, after all. And how could an old woman, who had merely been the housekeeper of a rich man, find so much cash to give the boy? She was pensioned, too, when I knew him."

"But she lived rent free in her master's house. Old Perrine—he was Marcus A. Perrine—who lived all his life—and his father before him—in one of those old residences on Rutgers Street. The Murchistons lived in one of Perrine's houses, around on Jefferson Street, just in the rear of the Perrine homestead, in fact."

"And why did Perrine, who was as stingy as sin, and hated all womankind—or said he did—why did he show so much kindness to the Murchistons?" cried the other warmly.

"What do you mean?" asked the first speaker.

"Well, Billy Murchiston hinted more than once to me—of course, it was when he had been drinking—that he was due to get a big piece of Marcus A. Perrine's property. Said it was due him."

"His vaporings!"

"I don't know. His mother was Adele Murchiston, the old woman's only child. They say she was a very beautiful girl."

"Perhaps. It was before my time."

"Anyhow, Billy didn't bear his father's name, whoever that father was. Old Perrine might have been

ely enough to marry the girl on the quiet. He claimed to be a woman hater; but there isn't such a thing in the world, you know," And the speaker chuckled.

"Well, it doesn't matter," said the other, with a sigh. "Poor Billy's dead. I saw him in the morgue. Of course, I wouldn't identify him. Why should I? It would only rake up old scandals, and there was nobody to mourn his loss but us."

"I never saw him since he went to Egypt for the Suez Transportation Company."

"He got pretty low down there. I heard from an English friend of mine that he got to going to the native quarters of the town, and was finally discharged in disgrace. I saw him once in New York after he returned; but he was with a blackleg—the very fellow, I believe, who killed him, and who is being tried for the crime now."

"This fellow the papers are full of, who killed Prince Arib el Hanid, too?" asked his friend, with interest.

"Yes. Among the thugs of the city the man was known as 'The Gypsy.' Billy Murchiston was hobnobbing with him. They were in a plot together to recover some ancient gems that were hidden in the wrappings of a mummy that was sold, with others, to Marcus A. Perrine some years before the eccentric old chap died.

"I never thought much of that El Hanid. I met him in London, and I know he lived by his wits there."

"He even posed as a fortune teller at one time," said his friend.

"Yes. And he gambled—fleeced the cockney youth, I understand, when nothing better offered. However, he had the key to the mummy's treasure, I believe. Neither the Gypsy nor Billy Murchiston knew exactly how to obtain the gems, when they had stolen the seven mummies. Besides, the robbery was discovered, Billy was shot, and the Gypsy was captured, before there was time for the mummies to be searched.

"While this Gypsy, it seems, was out on bail, El Hanid arrived. He evidently had some control over the Gypsy, for the latter meekly took him into the house where the mummies were stored for safety by Mr. Samuel Perrine, the executor of Marcus A. Perrine's estate, and there the prince revealed the secret of the hidden gems, obtaining them in a moment.

The Gypsy's cupidity was aroused at sight of the bag of uncut jewels. He attacked Prince Arib el Hanid, and killed him, in the struggle being injured himself. He now stands a chance of being tried for both murders. And they will surely send him to the chair, for they have an eye witness, it is said, of the second murder—the word of a drunken bum named Belcher.

"But the punishment of this thug will not bring Billy Murchiston back to life," concluded the relater of these facts. "And Billy was a good fellow when he was right."

"He was that," rejoined the other. "Well, I must run along. Come up and see us some night, Rogers—and bring the missus. You know my boy is just being turned out of medical school? Great Scott! how these young ones grow up."

"And how old *we* get," responded the reminiscent gentleman. "My girl is coming out, her mother says, this winter."

"Well, the kids are going to have an easier time of it than we did, Rogers."

"And a more decent time—the boys especially," grunted Rogers. "We did get in with a queer lot of fellows in our youth, old man!"

"Betcher!" said the other, turning away. "But Billy Murchiston wasn't the worst of them. Good day."

"By-by!"

The older man stood ruminating on the walk a minute longer before the door of the Chinese restaurant. The only person who seemed to pay him the least attention was a Chinaman who stood within earshot all through this conversation; and his interest was only manifest to the closest observer.

To the eye he was the ordinary Chinese, in voluminous pants, baggy coat with enormous sleeves, a queue coiled tightly on his head and glistening with oil dressing, and little, squinting eyes, the lids of which were puffed and discolored. He smoked a long-stemmed pipe with a tiny brass bowl, the tobacco being aromatic.

When the gentleman, who had known all about the man by the name of Murchiston, started along the walk finally, and passed this statue-like figure of the Chinaman, he suddenly found a card thrust into his hand.

He glanced around, startled. The Chinaman was not looking his way, even, but stood imperturbably, smoking his pipe and plainly dreaming.

Yet the American knew that a yellow hand had shot out from one of the baggy sleeves of the Chinaman's coat and thrust the bit of pasteboard into his own hand!

His surprise, however, did not cause Mr. Rogers to stop in his walk. He glanced at the card as he walked hesitatingly on, and saw writing on it, as follows:

"Will you please follow me? The detective who was instrumental in capturing the Gypsy, Nicholas Carter, would like to speak with you."

That was the sum and substance of the writing, and the surprise Mr. Rogers felt was doubled. He had heard of Nick Carter, the famous private detective, and he knew in a general way that he had been connected with the discovery and capture of the murderer of his old friend, William Murchiston. But the card, and the way he had obtained it, and the Chinaman himself, rather startled the gentleman out of his usual calm.

At the corner, having read these lines on the card

and digested them, he turned slowly back, wondering if Mr. Carter was near. At once the lounging Chinaman near Nam Wing's restaurant came to life. He seemed to have been watching Mr. Rogers out of the corner of his slanting eye.

He showed a hand again—a yellow, lean-looking hand, with desperately pointed nails, and with this hand he beckoned the American covertly. Rogers walked on toward him, and the Chinaman turned again and shuffled along the sidewalk.

He gave no further glance to see if he was followed, but at the second door he turned slowly into the building and mounted the first flight of stairs. Rogers hesitated an instant at the lower door. But he was a brave, if cautious, man; and, besides, it was broad daylight, and there was a police officer standing on the nearest corner, and the bluecoat saw him enter.

Rogers likewise mounted the flight of stairs. In the dusk of the hall he saw the figure of the Chinaman standing at an open door, waving him a courteous entrance.

The visitor entered. The Chinaman followed him, boldly shot the bolt of the door, and handed Mr. Rogers a chair. The Chinaman looked at him then, and, in perfect English, said:

"You are Mr. Horace Rogers. Your business is at seven State Street, and you are a bond broker. You reside in Central Park West. You were once connected with Kuhn, Loeb & Co. I know all about you, Mr. Rogers; but I didn't know you could identify the man who was murdered more than two months ago in the restaurant of Nam Wing, two doors from here."

Mr. Rogers' face expressed unbounded amazement.

"You seem to know a great deal about me," he said. "But I have no idea who you may be. You are not a—a Chinaman, in fact?"

Gravely his companion drew the skin-tight wig from his head, revealing a good head of short-cropped hair beneath. He stripped flesh-colored plasters from about his eyes, which removed much of the peculiar slanting appearance that they had had.

Thrusting forth his hand, he jerked off, one after the other, the tiny celluloid caps that had been fitted over his nails, and the false nails rattled on the table. He sat down and looked at Mr. Rogers with a smile.

"A little soap and water, judiciously applied, will do a whole lot more toward changing me into a white man, sir," he observed. "But you can see that I am not a Celestial. I am Nicholas Carter, Mr. Rogers, and by chance I heard your conversation with your friend regarding the man by the name of Murchiston.

"I admit to you, sir, that I have been vastly puzzled by the very thing which you have known all along. That is, the identity of this man whom the Gypsy killed—the man by the name of Murchiston—William Murchiston."

"Yes. So he was called. But his father's name I do not know."

"He evidently knew all about the old houses that Marcus A. Perrine owned on Rutgers and Jefferson Streets. It was he who planned the burglary of the Perrine homestead, and who aided the Gypsy and the Red Necks to get at the collection of valuables and curios that Mr. Perrine, in dying, left in charge of his nephew for twenty-five years before they were to be publicly exhibited."

"Billy Murchiston was a companion of the Gypsy—yes," admitted Mr. Rogers slowly. "But I am loath to admit that he would rob a house."

"How else would the burglars have known of the old tunnel between the two houses?" demanded Nick Carter sharply. "Billy Murchiston undoubtedly knew of it."

"A tunnel?" cried Rogers.

"Those two houses were built eighty or a hundred years ago. There was a huge cesspool in each yard. Years afterward the sewers were put through and the cesspools were drained empty. Then, for some reason, Mr. Marcus A. Perrine connected both cesspools, and the houses themselves, with a secret passage.

"Nobody at the present time seemed to know about the passage but the gang that burglarized the Rutgers Street house. Tom Ratigan's crooked friends, the Red Neck gang, as they are called, helped the Gypsy pull off that robbery.

"Now, Ratigan had owned the Jefferson Street house for more than ten years, having bought it of Mr. Samuel Perrine, the present executor of the estate. Had he, or his men, discovered the passage, they would have long before committed the burglary. Ratigan is bound to go up for a long term for complicity in the murder of Prince Arib el Hanid, you know. He and the Gypsy were going to divide the forty thousand dollars' worth of precious stones which were hidden in the mummy's wrappings, and for which the prince was killed by the Gypsy.

"Well, to get back to Murchiston: it looks reasonable that, if he lived in the Jefferson Street house when he was a boy, he must have known of the secret passage. He helped the burglars at first, and then quarreled with the Gypsy over the loot and was shot in Nam Wing's place here. By the way, I chanced to be on the spot the night it happened," added Nick Carter.

"I don't know that Billy Murchiston lived much in the house his grandmother occupied on Jefferson Street," declared Mr. Rogers.

"No?"

"He was brought up at a farmer's in Jersey. His mother seemed to be ashamed of him, or something. It was only after she died that his grandmother used to have him over here. She was hungry for company, I suppose."

"The boy was all the relative she had, then?"

"So I suppose," said Rogers.

"This, I believe, would be news to Mr. Samuel Perrine," said Nick Carter gravely. "Although he has spoken to me about Adele Murchiston, and how she and her mother lived so close in his uncle's house be-

hind the homestead so many years, he never mentioned this boy, the son of Adele."

"Good reason for that, perhaps, Mr. Carter," declared Rogers, with a smile.

"You think that Billy Murchiston might have been Marcus A. Perrine's son?" queried Nick boldly.

"Such things might happen. And if he were it would not be to Sentimental Sammy's advantage to admit Billy's existence."

"True," admitted Nick. "But I know Sentimental Sammy, as you call him, better than you do, Mr. Rogers. He would never injure anybody. He is honest, though a millionaire. You may think that hard to believe?" And the detective smiled again.

"However, this that you and your friend were talking about is vastly interesting to me. I tell you frankly I am here in Chinatown, in disguise, trying to trace the very identity of the man whom you knew so well—the man named Murchiston.

"Mr. Perrine is not satisfied to let the mystery rest. And it is a puzzle that I was anxious to work out myself. Now, through you, I have learned who the first man the Gypsy murdered was; at least, his name and his claims.

"But I must go further. I must try and find out who Billy Murchiston really was. Did he live long with his grandmother in Jefferson Street after Adele died?"

"Four or five years. My folks were old settlers on Rutgers Street themselves," said Mr. Rogers. "I played with Billy. Afterward we kept in touch with each other. He was a wild devil. I often helped him out of scrapes, for he was a charming companion. But he got away from us all at last."

"And he claimed to be old man Perrine's son?"

"I never heard him say so. He hinted at being somebody more than what he appeared. But if he had any inkling of the truth of his father's identity, he never told it to me. It is a fact, however, that he had large sums of money at times, and it was a mystery where the old woman could have got it for him."

"I am much obliged to you, Mr. Rogers," said Nick Carter. "If you will wait five minutes till I remove the rest of my disguise in the next room, we will go uptown together. I will send you home in my car, which is waiting around in Mulberry Street by police headquarters."

Mr. Rogers waited.

CHAPTER II.

"SENTIMENTAL SAMMY" COMES OUT STRONG.

"Now, Mr. Perrine," said Nick Carter, sitting back in the millionaire's chair, after reading his client a somewhat exhaustive report, "that is the statement of the case to date. Is it concluded?"

The soap manufacturer, who was a fleshy man with a pink complexion and light hair, plastered carefully down upon his crown, wiped his eyes, gulped down what may have been a sob, and said in reply:

"And so that was the trouble that spoiled the life of pretty little Adele Murchiston? Too bad—too bad!"

He was silent for a minute, and then, having turned over the statement of the detective in his mind, he suddenly appreciated Nick's final phrase.

"What's that?" he cried. "'Is it concluded?' Is the case ended, do you mean? How should I know? It is for you to say, Mr. Carter."

"I am not so sure of that," said Nick, somewhat grimly.

"Eh?"

"Perhaps you have gone as far as you care to in this investigation. This Billy Murchiston is dead. Whoever, or whatever, he was, it does not matter now. He seems to have been a free man; there were no heirs of his body that we know of. Best let a sleeping dog lie, you know."

"You mean that, if he chanced to be the son of my uncle—otherwise, the actual heir of Marcus A. Perrine—it might be better to let the mystery remain a mystery?"

Nick nodded.

"I am sorry you think so badly of me, Mr. Carter," declared the other, flushing pinker than ever. "If my uncle's property is not mine I want to know it—and whoever has a better right to it may take it and welcome! I have made enough money of my own."

"But the scandal," suggested Nick.

"That is another matter. I know what my uncle was. He was a crotchety, troublesome old fellow. He had little use for other men, and none at all for women. I do not believe he would have allowed himself, under any circumstances, to marry any girl, however pretty, on the sly.

"But had he fallen in love," pursued Mr. Samuel Perrine vigorously, "he was a gentleman and a man of honor. He would never have injured a woman. If he married Adele, and she bore him a son, I cannot imagine any reason that would have caused him to deny his marriage, or deny his child and wife."

"But you must admit," said the detective, "that his keeping the old Murchiston woman and her daughter in the Jefferson Street house looks terribly suspicious. The Murchistons lived behind closed shutters for some years—until after Adele died. What did it mean?"

"That is what bothers you?" asked Perrine.

"Yes."

"And it mystifies me, too," admitted the soap manufacturer. "But I could go through the rest of my life without learning the secret. It does not really concern me. But you have suggested something that must be unraveled."

"And that is——"

"The family name has never been besmirched," said the millionaire earnestly, "unless it has been by soap grease." And he made a little face as he said it. "But the possibility that Uncle Marcus was an unhung scoundrel opens another page," added the gentleman, with vigor. "I do not believe he ever did any one an

ill turn in his life. I want to know the truth about these Murchistons.

"I authorize you, therefore, Mr. Carter, to continue your investigations until you can—if it be possible—bring me the complete history of this Billy Murchiston, and who and what he was."

"Humph! You have set me a task, Mr. Perrine, that bids fair to be as hard—and as thankless, too—as the tracing the past history of the man with the missing thumb. I have that matter on my hands, too; otherwise our case against the Gypsy and Tom Ratigan, the Jefferson Street saloon keeper and ward heeler, may fall through."

"The man with the missing thumb?" repeated Mr. Perrine. "You mean the Egyptian—the murderer?"

"Oh, no. I mean this old fellow, Belcher. The real man with the missing thumb, not the imitation," said Nick.

"How is that?" queried Perrine curiously.

"This Gypsy, you understand, tried to—and did, for a time—deceive us all by posing in the character of a certain well-known person living in the neighborhood of Jefferson Street, named Belcher. Ratigan spirited Belcher away for a time, because the old man was an eye witness of the murder of Prince Arib el Hanid.

"They were afraid Belcher would 'leak.' But Belcher proved to be a hard nut to crack, after all. He's not like Buzzard Aisle, who turned State's evidence in regard to the murder of Billy Murchiston, and is ready to testify against the Gypsy now.

"Keep this Belchers away from booze and he develops a will power quite astonishing in such a wreck of humanity. He has, so far, refused to admit that he knows anything about the murder of the prince.

"You know, in his fight with El Hanid, the Gypsy had his thumb severed from his left hand. Belcher years ago lost his left thumb. The Gypsy seized upon the coincidence—or Tom Ratigan did and advised him—and dressed in Belcher's old togs, shaved off his long hair, and posed as Belcher, being minus the same thumb. Our smart little friend, the street arab, Popeye, was the lad who really led me to see this fact."

"But what about the man Belcher?"

"I must look up his antecedents, too. If we can get something on him, we can make him witness for the State. Do you see?"

Mr. Perrine's interest waned at this point. He observed:

"Well, Mr. Carter, I shall expect you to get to the bottom of Murchiston's antecedents. I put the case in your hands. Draw on me, if necessary. Good day, sir!"

Nick Carter's respect for the soap manufacturer, upon whom society turned its back, was increased considerably by this decision. He felt no little curiosity himself, did the detective, regarding the real origin and life story of Billy Murchiston, the man who had gone wrong and finally met his death in Nam Wing's restaurant the night that Nick and his two assistants, Chickering Carter and Patsy Donovan, had chanced to eat a late supper there.

As Murchiston seemed to have spent some of his boyhood in the same neighborhood with old man Belcher, the witness with the missing thumb, the investigation into both men's lives seemed to be likely to crisscross.

Nick himself, as we have seen, had taken up the tracing of the dead man's career, as neither Patsy nor Chick had accomplished all he desired. Nick's venture into Chinatown had resulted most happily in his meeting with Mr. Horace Rogers, the bond broker who had known all about Billy Murchiston in his youth, and who might have come forward and identified the dead man at the morgue two months before and so saved the authorities—and, incidentally, Nick Carter—a great deal of trouble.

But the average citizen does not care to get mixed up in such cases. "Keep away from the police" seems to be the New Yorker's motto. And perhaps there is good reason for doing so, for the "innocent bystander" and the detained witness both usually get the worst of it, while frequently the criminal goes free!

For the time Nick set Chick and Patsy on other work; he went down to Jefferson and Rutgers Streets himself to try and gain the history of the dead and gone Billy Murchiston, and likewise that of the man with the missing thumb. But Nick was not alone. He had at his beck and call a street gamin whom he had befriended, an observant, sharp little customer, who went by the cognomen of "Pop-eye" because of his protuberant orbs.

After what Nick had already done to Tom Ratigan, the saloon keeper, and the gang calling themselves the Red Necks, it would not have been safe for Nick to appear in that neighborhood in his true character. There were at least two dozen men hanging about the corner saloon, still run wide open by Ratigan's family, who would have killed Nick as soon as take a drink. And there were hundreds in the neighborhood who would have stayed their own hands and refused assistance had they seen the detective "getting his"!

Once already had the gang tried to settle with Nick Carter. They had thrown him, gagged and bound, into the secret passage between the two old Perrine houses, and turned the city water into the hole, intending to drown the detective like a rat in a sewer basin!

Providentially Nick had escaped this peril through the help of his assistants. Now Mr. Samuel Perrine had bricked up the passage at the line of his back fence and had the cistern and the remainder of the passage filled in, closing the exit into his uncle's house effectually. With exit at that end cut off, the tunnel under Ratigan's Jefferson Street property could be of little value to the Red Necks.

Mr. Perrine, too, had finally found a reliable couple to take care of the Rutgers Street house, wherein was stored the collection of curios secured by his late un-

cle; and with these people the boy, Pop-eye, made his home.

Pop-eye was an independent youngster. He had been in a desperately ragged and starved condition when Mr. Samuel Perrine and Nick Carter had first run across him. The soap millionaire had "invested" twenty dollars in his regeneration—and sent him a dozen cakes of soap! Pop-eye had needed the soap as much as he did anything.

But Nick had seen to the expending of the twenty dollars—and perhaps some of his own—with the result that the gamin was now neatly dressed and was sure of a "stake" if he should ever be penniless again.

Pop-eye would not agree to being supported by either the detective or the millionaire. He was delighted when Nick made use of him, and when he was able to do something helpful for Nick would accept a small sum for it. But every day he sold papers, or even polished boots or swept stores and sidewalks, and so made his living.

At the old Perrine house, on Rutgers Street, where he now lodged, Pop-eye helped the woman dust and clean each day in payment for the trouble she took for him. He ate, as usual, where and how he could, being a true street arab at heart, as careless as the grasshopper for the future.

But Nick had spoken to him on several occasions in regard to obtaining and holding some position that would assure him a decent and more certain living than the precarious trades he followed. These wise words had made a certain impression upon Pop-eye, and they bore fruit one morning about this time.

The boy with the prominent and rolling orbs, that seemed to see everything going on about him—behind as well as before—strolled from his lodging into Jefferson Street, and found, in front of Tom Ratigan's house, that he had bought from the Perrine Estate ten years before, an object of new interest.

A wagon had backed up to the sidewalk at this point, and the driver and a sailorish-looking man, with quick motions, a well-bronzed face, thick and short grayish hair, and a sturdy body—were unloading a miscellaneous heap of lumber, sail cloth, a bench, or counter, stools, and other paraphernalia, preparatory to setting up a stand in and over the areaway of the Ratigan house.

There was a crowd of boys around watching the proceedings—many of them waiting their chance to steal something. But the sailor-man was very lively and watchful, withal he seemed a jolly fellow. He was very handy with tools, too, and went to work to build his stand with a briskness that showed him to be a master.

Pop-eye was the first boy who offered to assist him, and in a few minutes he was hard at work with the stranger putting up the framework for the awning roof, and doing a multitude of other little jobs. In fact, the gamin considered himself at once empowered to "chase" the other urchins.

"Youse kids beat it!" he advised some of the ne'er-do-wells whom Pop-eye knew were waiting about to make trouble. "Dis guy is a friend of mine. Youse mix wit' him an' dere'll be trouble wit' me comin' your way."

Which was not an empty threat, for Pop-eye had a considerable reputation in the neighborhood, and among boys of his own size, as a "scrapper." The crowd gradually faded away, and Pop-eye worked faithfully, and by the sweat of his brow, until noon. By that time the place had blossomed into no mean little shop, though at present without stock of any sort.

"Now you stay here and watch things, boy, while I go for lunch. I'll bring you back a snack," promised the man. "My stock won't be over until this afternoon."

The shack was partly boarded in, partly shielded by the side of the high house stoop, roofed with canvas, and fitted with shutters in front that, when they were bolted on from the inside, made a pretty tight and safe little shop. Pop-eye, boylike, decided that he never would want any better fun than to 'tend such a little store, and when the man came back he "struck him for a job."

"Say, you gimme a job and I'll keep the kids away from youse," he offered as an inducement. "There's some mighty bad kids around here, and if youse ain't in wit' them they'll raid yer ranch some day and tear the daylights out of it."

"So if I don't give you a job the kids will raid me; eh?" returned the sailorish individual, eying Pop-eye oddly for a moment.

Then suddenly he made a grab for the gamin, caught him as he dodged, and the boy was slammed against the board partition and held there so forcibly for a moment that his eyes actually seemed about to fall out of his head, and he gasped like a fish out of water.

"I'll show you what I do to boys who threaten me!" declared the man, but with perfect good humor. Pop-eye found himself impotent, although his friend held him with but one hand.

Suddenly the boy was flopped over, in the most undignified attitude known to childhood, face down across the sailor-man's knee, and the next instant the broad palm of his chastiser smacked sharply on that part of Pop-eye's anatomy over which his nether garments fitted him the tightest.

The strokes were no love pats, either! The impact could have been heard half a block, and Pop-eye roared, first in anger, then for mercy. He had never in his life been chastised so promptly and thoroughly.

"Now you sit down there—or stand, if it hurts you," advised the seaman, without showing the least trace of exertion, but putting himself between the boy and immediate escape by the doorway of the shop.

"Think this over, and see if, upon reflection, you want to work for me. I'll give you two dollars a week and your grub. Two dollars is all a boy of your age and size should have to spend. I happen to know

that your lodging is assured, Pop-eye. What d'ye say?"

Pop-eye gulped down a big sob, scrubbed his eyes out with both knuckles, and got a square look at his recent assailant. His first remark was:

"Chee! but youse is a strong guy fer fair!"

"And you see what you get if you don't walk the deck straight here," said the man, still smiling, but looking as though he meant it, too.

"All right," muttered Pop-eye. "I'll stay. But, chee! dere's anudder guy I woiks fer oncet in a while. If dere's anyt'ing doin' with him dis job'll hafter be called off."

"Oh, you're a popular young man, are you?" observed the proprietor of the new shop. "Well, I'll give you a trial. Now I'm going to telephone for my stuff. Keep your eye out for boarders." And he went away whistling, followed by Pop-eye's chastened, but admiring, glance.

"Chee! but he didn't look like he had it in him. He's as strong as Mr. Carter," was the gamin's thought. "I wonder what's his game around here. Dere's enough little pops now—and he don't look like he was a reg'lar storekeeper. I seen fellers like him down on the docks, and in the Water Street joints. Humph!"

Pop-eye's new employer had aroused the boy's suspicions; he aroused everybody else's curiosity. The neighborhood was agog as he worked at his stand and set up his coffee urn, ice cooler for clams and oysters, and gas cooker at the rear of the little shop for "frys." The sailor had opened a smart little sidewalk lunch stand by evening, and did a thriving business that first night.

He had hired the place of the Ratigans, but he was quite unknown to them, and was not under the protection of the boss, as witness what happened before the stranger's stand had been open for business forty-eight hours.

It was the second evening. Custom had lulled. The Sailor—he had not given even Pop-eye a name to call him by—was standing behind a heap of bivalves, oyster knife in hand, waiting for the next customer, while Pop-eye, enshrouded from neck to heels in a big white apron, presided at the coffee urn.

Suddenly a gang of half a dozen of the toughest fellows in the neighborhood—every one of them members of the Red Necks—and fresh from potations at the Ratigan saloon on the corner, came noisily across the street, and lined up before the little bar under the awning.

"Say, cullie! youse didn't send us no invite to yer openin'. How erbout dat oversight?" demanded the leader, thrusting forward his aggressive chin and leering at the Sailor. "Youse wanter square yerself fer dat. Git solid wit' us, an' yer solid wit' de gang—see?"

"Glad to get your custom, gentleman. What can I serve you?" asked the cool and calm man behind the counter.

"Give us a dozen raws apiece, and a cup of coffee ter go wit' 'em—an' be spry about it, cull."

"I shall have to warn you that we do no trust business here," said the Sailor sternly. "You are prepared with two bits apiece, I suppose? That will be the charge."

The bully thrust his doubled fist suddenly across the heap of oysters and shook it under the Sailor's nose.

"Smell dat, you mutt!" he roared. "Trot out yer stuff, or we'll wreck de joint. See?"

"Quite!" ejaculated the proprietor of the stand, but without raising his voice.

His left hand shot out and clutched the bully by the throat of his woolen shirt—a grip that almost stopped the fellow's breath on the instant. "Smack! smack!" rang out the solid, palm-broad blows, first on one side of the bully's face, then on the other. A fling with that single powerful arm followed, and the fellow staggered back across the walk and fell squarely in the gutter.

The others made a rush for the man who had done this. In a flash he reached under the counter and brought forth a revolver with a muzzle that looked like a young cannon—the most determined-looking weapon those rowdies had ever looked at!

"And when they come in bunches I set this chap on 'em," declared the Sailor, absolutely unruffled of tone or manner, and without raising his voice.

But they knew he meant it. It halted them instantly, and they slunk back, helped up their fallen leader, and with dire, but muttered, threats, moved away. The row was over in short order, and the proprietor of the sidewalk lunch seemed to consider it all in the day's work, and made no comment, even, upon it to his delighted and electrified assistant.

"Ar-r chee!" muttered Pop-eye. "I gotter tell Mr. Carter about him. He's de greatest ever!"

CHAPTER III.

THE SAILOR IS CURIOUS.

The Sailor was the friendliest mortal that ever walked in shoe leather. He hailed every resident of the block that passed. He made a clam chowder twice a week that pleased the housewives of the neighborhood immensely, not only because it was good, but because he sold a large pail full for a dime.

At night—he never seemed to close his stand, for there was always a light in it—he was ready to serve the belated wayfarer with coffee or shellfish, and he learned to call half a hundred men by their first name in a week!

He remained somewhat of a curiosity to the neighborhood, however, for he never told his own name. He said, "Call me Mate, if you've got to put a handle to it. I've been used to hearing that."

This clinched the idea that he was a sailor, if his walk, talk, and general manner had not before done so. Once Pop-eye heard him say to old Roger

M'Cann, who had lived in the neighborhood since he landed from the sailing vessel that brought him from Ireland:

"Yes, I lived right around here when I was a kid. I used to swipe stuff from your stand when you and Dugan run the grocery around the corner, Mr. M'Cann. I'm owing you many a cup of coffee to pay for the stuff I put in my pockets. Stop often, uncle!"

"Begorra! I don't remimber ye," declared M'Cann, piping in his shrill old voice. "But, shure, there was plinty of thim spalpanes at the grane stuff."

"And right you are!" declared the Sailor. "I believe the boys were worse in them days than they are now."

"They couldn't be," returned old M'Cann, wagging his head.

"And Billy Murchiston—d'ye remember him, uncle?"

"Billy Murchiston?—Murchiston, is ut?" repeated M'Cann. "Shure, wasn't thot the name of the ould lady that lived in this very house—before Tom Ratigan bought ut?"

"So she did," admitted the Sailor. "And she had a grandson, Billy. He was a wild devil," he added ruminatively. "But he didn't stay with the old woman much. He lived somewhere on a farm over in Jersey for a while."

"I remimber the ould lady," admitted M'Cann. "And if I recall ut right, didn't she have a pretty daughter?"

"Billy's mother," said the Sailor shortly. "She died."

"Ay, ay! So she did. Seems to me there was some trouble. Her husband left her, or did she leave him? Heh, heh! If old Belcher was here he could tell you, Mr. Mate. He knowed thim Murchistons well."

"Indeed!" ejaculated the other; and his interest in the conversation seemed to flag from that moment.

Pop-eye likewise heard his new employer tell another gossipy party that, as a boy, he had always wanted to keep some kind of a little shop in the neighborhood. It had been his dream to do this all the time he had been traveling about the world, he said. And now he had started this little pop as a "flyer"—to see how he would like it.

The Sailor was always jolly and ready for a dish of gossip with man, woman, or child. But he was not always the same, even at that! Pop-eye noted some difference in his manner and character at times that quite surprised him.

On occasion his employer treated the boy as though he were his son. He could be stern, but he was kind. At other times he rather ignored Pop-eye, and lacked patience with him. On one or two occasions, too, the observant gamin noticed that the Sailor seemed strangely forgetful.

For instance, he had a long conversation one day with an old woman who had been in the neighborhood for many, many years, and claimed to have worked for Mrs. Murchiston, Marcus A. Perrine's old housekeeper, after that lady and her daughter came to live in the Jefferson Street house.

The next morning early the old woman appeared at the stand again to buy a pint of coffee, and the Sailor seemed to consider her a stranger, and evidently had forgotten the subject of their conversation the afternoon before.

There were times, too, when Pop-eye's employer did not seem so sailorish as at other occasions. It made the boy suspicious. He wondered what he was really here for; what was the game that the lunch stand was covering? Pop-eye was deeply puzzled.

The boy came early to the stand, and he often remained till eight or nine in the evening. Not that he was obliged to. His employer was easy enough on him; when there was the likelihood of few customers being in, Pop-eye could do what he liked.

But several times during the day and evening the Sailor went away from the stand. He went around the corner out of Jefferson Street, walking west, and Pop-eye longed mightily to follow him and see where he went. He supposed he must have a room in the neighborhood, for he could not sleep much in the stand, although, sailor-like, he had rigged a broad shelf under the counter, with a blanket and pillow, and often took what he called "a watch below" while Pop-eye was on guard. The latter thought his employer must lodge near, for on several occasions, when he had been away from the stand, he returned with some small change in his apparel—a new necktie, or a different shirt; but he dressed in about the same clothing all the time.

The neighborhood about this time—a city election was approaching—was rife with gossip regarding the outcome of Tom Ratigan's arrest. The case against him was laughed at by his friends. They did not believe for a moment that "them reformers" had caught Ratigan "with the goods."

But he had some difficulty in getting bail. The bond was scrutinized very closely by the district attorney, and the ward politician's friends could not get Senator Groghan's name on it at all, for the senator had already taken warning from Nick Carter and would dabble in no "queer" bonds for his political friends.

The Gypsy's case was so serious this time that there was no hope for his getting bail at all. The Egyptian, although he had been in the country scarcely the legal term to vote, had been a captain for Tom Ratigan for some time. The Red Necks would miss him sorely at the coming election.

Ratigan set to work the moment he was free for the time himself to get old Belcher out of the detention prison. But the personal bond demanded for the witness was heavy, and the conditions under which the ward heeler secured Belcher's release were such that to have tried to get the old man out of the State would have been ridiculous.

Belcher had, it was true, refused to testify for the State; but there was no telling when he might be influenced in that way. Ratigan knew him only as a

half-crazy inebriate, willing to do any little job as long as he was allowed drink enough to keep him in a befuddled condition of mind—"on the verge of the tremens," as Pop-eye had told Nick Carter.

But during the weeks Belcher, the man with the missing thumb, had been in jail as witness to the murder of Prince Arih el Hanid in the Perrine house on Rutgers Street, he had of necessity remained sober. He had been under the care of the prison physician, who had treated his diseased stomach and helped him to get a grip on his nerves.

The "Old Bum Belcher" who came back to Jefferson Street walked erect, had a fairly clear eye, and could say "No!" when asked to take a drink! Ratigan found him quite a different person from the ne'er-do-well that had hung about his saloon, and slept in the old house, in the areaway of which the Sailor had erected his lunch stand.

The neighbors commented upon the change in the man with the missing thumb, too. To the Sailor, who evinced much curiosity about him, one ancient dame said:

"We always knowed old Belcher was a gentleman born. Why! I remember when he first came here, and a fine set-up young man he was. 'Old' I call him, but it's not old at all he really is. He should be as good a man as yerself this day if he'd not taken to the booze.

"He boarded in this very house where Tom Ratigan's put him to watch—that's right, sir! He was a roomer with old Mrs. Murchiston, for high and mighty as she was, she'd make a penny any day. It was her eyes that always glued to a dollar when she saw one.

"I remimber well enough how she told about that her daughter—some called her pretty, but she wasn't a patch on me own Mary Ann, with the fine red cheeks and black eyes of her!—was going to marry a rich felly some day. And nobody ever seen that rich felly—not much." And the old woman tossed her head, evidently remembering, even after these many years, the haughtiness of the Perrine's housekeeper, who thought herself and her daughter above their neighbors.

"And so Belcher lodged with them?" said the Sailor reflectively. He did not often seem to retain his interest in the gossip as long as on this occasion.

"As I tell you, mister, Mr. Belcher was a fine figure of a young man then, and that girl of Mrs. Murchiston's was some attraction in this house, I suppose. I guess Belcher and she were friendly enough till the old lady found it out and put it down.

"Then Belcher went away—he went suddenly. And the Murchistons shut up the front of the house. It came out that the girl had been married for some time—but not to Belcher, oh no!" And the old woman shook her head and grinned, and looked very sly and mean as she told the rest of the story.

"Nobody was scarce allowed to the funeral when he died, after the child came. At any rate, the neighbors warn't made welcome. Them that went said they was never even axed did they have a mout' on 'em! They buried the girl and shoveled the clods on her in short order, and then the old lady lived on in the house here alone. The boy, when he grew older, was here some, but not much."

"And this man with the missing thumb, this Belcher, was absent all this time?" asked the proprietor of the lunch stand, earnestly thoughtful.

"He appeared in the neighborhood again after the girl was dead. He was a drunken sot then. He's been that ever since. He'd got mixed up in some machinery somewhere and lost his thumb. Don't you believe any story about his having lost it in the war. Shure, the Civil War was long over before Belcher was big enough to carry a musket." And the narrator chuckled and went her way.

The Sailor remained thoughtful, muttering to himself: "So the threads cross there, do they? This Belcher knew and lived with the Murchistons! It is even possible that this wreck of a man once loved pretty Adele Murchiston. And what about Billy, the child of the unfortunate girl? What does Belcher know about him?"

Then he noted Pop-eye standing by and frankly listening, while his protuberant orbs looked about to drop out and roll across the sidewalk.

"You get out of here, boy!" he commanded, with a gesture of wrath at the street gamin. "I want to be alone!"

CHAPTER IV.

MAKING FRIENDS WITH BELCHER.

Belcher, the man with the missing thumb, came directly from jail to the old house on Jefferson Street that had sheltered him on more than recent occasions, it seemed. One of the Ratigan henchmen met him, and Belcher might have celebrated his release from the detention cell by an old-fashioned debauch; but he refused.

Clothed now in more or less decent garments, and in his right mind, the man was not so evil-looking a creature. Having shed the old dressing gown and bandanna he had once worn, he was no longer a marked object on the streets. He entered the old house, indeed, without causing any remark in the neighborhood; but he did not escape the watchful eye of the Sailor who had established the lunch stand beside the high stoop of the old house.

The lower East Side—especially the cheap lodging houses along and near the Bowery—is the Sargasso Sea for the derelicts of humanity. Amid poverty and forgetfulness many men who have stood well in society at one time in their checkered careers live hopelessly on in these poor districts, unknown to their friends, until death of rum gets them, and they fill a pauper's grave. Some of them are "remittance men"—the black sheep of well-to-do families, who are kept alive, and out of their friends' sight, by the small

income that dribbles to them through the mail or by grace of a family lawyer.

Now and then one may read in the paper of the death of some habitué of these low and mean quarters, who has lived for years under an assumed name, and, in dying, is laid out in a cheap undertaker's room and a collection made for his burial. Often there appears a veiled woman or two, to take a last look at the wreck who was once, undoubtedly, a man. Women are the last to forget.

What the mystery was about Belcher's antecedents, and why he had deteriorated into a rum-soaked wreck, and had hung about the Jefferson Street house where the Murchistons once lived, seemed to be the subject of the Sailor's keen interest.

The basement door of the old house was shut off from use by the construction of the lunch stand. Ratigan's man opened the main door, which had a new and formidable lock put upon it; and he locked the door again and carried away the key after he left the man with the missing thumb in his old quarters.

It was evident that Tom Ratigan was taking no chances in the witness, whom he had got out of jail, running away. And the Sailor noted that the witness, or prisoner, was fed from the lunch counter of Ratigan's saloon; not too liberally, either—at least, in point of food. But the watchful sailor noted that, whenever the man came over from the saloon to see Belcher, he brought with him a flask—sometimes a bottle. The witness was being plied with liquor and his food supply was kept low to force the old man to drink and thus recreate within him the appetite that the prison surgeon had managed to check.

But the very day Belcher arrived at the old house, he wandered through its echoing rooms and came finally to the front basement. The windows were heavily barred without; but he opened an inner shutter for light, and found himself looking into the back of the Sailor's neat little shellfish and coffee stand.

The proprietor waved a cordial hand to him, saw the prisoner's hungry eyes fixed upon the great pile of oysters, and in a trice had opened a dozen for him and presented them on a plate at the window.

Belcher shook his head and mouthed: "I ain't got no money," pulling his empty pockets inside out to better show his meaning.

The Sailor seemed really offended that Belcher should think he wanted such a sordid thing as money! He shook his head vigorously and proffered the plate of raws again.

Then the prisoner intimated that the window was nailed fast. The Sailor smiled in a superior fashion, thrust a hand through the grating, and with a single vigorous shove slid up the heavy window sash for several inches.

"Of course," he said to Belcher, as the man looked both amazed and frightened, "you are not obliged to tell anybody that this particular window isn't fastened. I discovered it the other day. When you feel like a bite to eat, or a hot cup of coffee, or a bit of gossip, just come down here. You're welcome."

Belcher accepted the plate of oysters and ate them ravenously. They did, indeed, soothe the craving of his stomach for its old stimulant. But he gazed on the Sailor suspiciously. Evidently he wondered what was behind the unexpected kindness proffered him by this stranger.

But the Sailor made no further advances just then. He saw to it, however, that every time Belcher wandered downstairs and came to the window, there was something tempting ready for him to eat. On the second day Belcher brought with him a couple of half-pint flasks of whisky, with which he was so generously supplied from Ratigan's saloon, and offered them to the Sailor, who accepted the liquor with warm thanks.

This evidently pleased the man with the missing thumb. He felt that he was giving value in exchange for the food he received from the lunchman. Even yet there seemed remaining in him some of the instincts of manhood that he had once possessed.

In a week the Sailor had a collection of whisky and brandy flasks, the contents of which was sufficient to have doped an ordinary man for a month! That Belcher remained sober evidently both displeased and surprised Ratigan, who heard of the fact from his go-between; so the politician came himself.

He glanced in over the counter at the brisk and smiling seaman before he entered the house. They had not chanced to meet before.

"Good day, sir. Can I serve you with anything? I've got the best that Fulton Market affords," declared the Sailor.

"I'm not sure I shan't patronize you, considering that you are a tenant of mine," said the lean, dark-complexioned politician, mouthing his eternal black cigar. "But not just now."

"Ah! You are Mr. Thomas Ratigan?" said the Sailor. "Happy to meet you."

Ratigan saw in every man the possibility of a vote; in some, several! He was always affable with newcomers in the ward. He reached forth his clawlike hand and shook that of the Sailor.

"Do you see much of that chap who watches this place for me?" queried Ratigan.

"No. I saw him come in the other day. Seems to me he hasn't gone out much," said the Sailor carelessly. He neglected to mention that he knew very well the man Belcher was locked into the building and was practically a prisoner there.

Ratigan mounted the steps and let himself in with a latchkey. He was in the house some time, and when he came out he looked in at the Sailor again, in passing, and seemed to scrutinize him much more closely than before. There was a portentous frown upon his brow, too. Ratigan was disturbed.

But the man with the missing thumb grew more friendly with Pop-eye's employer. The Sailor and he had many conferences through the open basement

window, and Pop-eye marked this well. His time was pretty fully engaged, and he admired the Sailor as much as he had at first; but the gamin's conscience began to trouble him in relation to Nick Carter.

Nick was his benefactor, Nick was interested in the man with the missing thumb, and therefore Nick should know all about this Sailor and the friendship he had conceived for Belcher, the witness in the murder trial.

So Pop-eye stole away from the stand earlier than usual one evening, and made his way to the detective's house on Madison Avenue. He had been there on one or two occasions, and Adelina, Patsy Garvan's wife, had made much of Pop-eye, so he was sure of a welcome whether Nick was at home or not.

He chanced to find the detective in, however, and Joseph ushered the boy into Nick's room, where the rest of the family, too, were gathered. Whatever discussion had been in progress when Pop-eye was announced was hushed at his appearance, and they all —Nick, Patsy and his wife, and Danny—looked at the boy smilingly. Chick chanced to be absent.

"And what brings you here, my boy?" queried Nick. "You don't favor us with a visit often."

Pop-eye, feeling somehow that they were all laughing at him, and thereby abashed, explained the immediate reason for his coming.

"Yes, I was quite well aware that Belcher was back in the old house," Nick said. "I have my eye on him. But who is this fellow you are working for, Pop-eye?"

"I dunno," replied the boy, somewhat sullenly.

"Do you think he may know something about these mysteries that are puzzling us?"

"I dunno," repeated Pop-eye, in the same manner.

"Come, come! You are hiding something. What do you suspect about this man who has opened the eating stand there by the house?"

"He's a good feller," growled the gamin. "I didn't come here to talk about him, Mr. Carter."

"Even if he were one of Ratigan's friends you would be chary of reporting his acts to me?" queried the shrewd detective, smiling.

"I dunno. He's an all right guy, he is!" declared Pop-eye, with some enthusiasm. "And like enough if he knowed I'd come up here to tell youse about Belcher he'd knock me block off!"

Nick fairly laughed aloud at this statement, and the others seemed similarly amused. "Aren't you afraid he'll find out where you are to-night, Pop-eye?" Patsy asked him.

"Ar-r, chee! He's safe enough. He's allus there till after midnight, and I guess he stays all night a good deal of the time. I ain't never got there in the morning as early as him yet," declared the gamin.

"But he surely doesn't live in that shanty?" queried Adelina.

"I dunno where he roosts," growled Pop-eye. "I have to stay by the stand when he beats it for his room."

"Well, my son," said Nick kindly, "I have always said you were an observant boy, and you have proved it again. Continue to keep your eyes open and something may come of it. And it will do no harm if you report to me occasionally—or, if I chance to be away, to Chick."

"Yes, sir," said the boy, somewhat mollified, yet still wondering what it was that so amused the others.

He went downtown again, and on his way home passed the lunch stand. The Sailor saw him, and said:

"Hey! you ought to be abed before this hour of the night. You won't be fit for your work in the morning. Cut along with you now!"

Pop-eye went to his lodging grumblingly. He was glad, after all, that he had seen Mr. Carter that evening.

CHAPTER V.

TROUBLE BREWS.

Ratigan's visit to the old house seemed to have made Belcher shy for a day or two. He did not appear so frequently in the basement and gossip with the Sailor.

The latter, however, when he did see the prisoner, was as pleasant and chatty as ever. He tempted Belcher's appetite with several new dishes, too, and more liquor was handed out to the lunchman in exchange. The pint and half-pint flasks of whisky and brandy would have made a respectable showing on a barroom buffet. It was evidently Ratigan's intention to supply the man with the missing thumb a great deal more liquor than it would have been wise for him to drink.

Belcher kept straight, however. Sometimes he showed that he had been drinking a little; but in that first fortnight, while the Sailor was gaining his confidence, the poor old wreck kept pretty decent, considering the temptation handed him.

One day the Sailor got reminiscent in talking with the prisoner, and he said:

"I remember selling lemonade from a crock right in this areaway when I was a kid. Billy Murchiston and me was in partnership, and it was Billy's grandmother lent us the crock and set us up in business."

Belcher started and looked at him through the open window and the grating. "Did you know the Murchistons?" he asked softly.

"I knowed Billy," said the Sailor, appearing not to notice Belcher's excitement. "Him and me was chums for a while. That was when his grandmother brought him over here from Jersey to live—after Billy's mother died."

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed Belcher, in the same suppressed voice. "Did you know her?"

"The old lady?"

"Adele—Billy's mother."

"Never saw her," said the other carelessly. "Billy never came over here much till after his mother died."

"True—true," muttered the old man, shaking his head. "Poor girl!"

The Sailor did not seem to notice this speech. He was busy with a customer for a few moments. When he came back to the window he found that the sash and the shutters were closed.

That same day Tom Ratigan entered the house again. The new tenant saw him and waved him a courteous greeting, to which the politician merely vouchsafed a surly nod.

The upper door had scarcely closed behind the owner when the Sailor heard a noise at the basement window. The inside shutters were opened and the sash raised a scrap. The owner of the lunch stand hurried down the steps and put his face close to the aperture.

"Cheese it! Your boss has just come in the house!" he whispered.

It was a serious mistake on the Sailor's part. The shutters were thrown fully back and the sash wide open. Ratigan himself stood at the casement, scowling at the Sailor over the end of his cigar.

"So!" he growled. "I thought you were getting altogether too friendly with that bum upstairs. Cut it out—d'ye hear? If you don't you'll look for another stand—and you'll look a long ways from here before you find one."

The Sailor shrugged his shoulders and said nothing. Ratigan withdrew, closed the window, and a little later came with hammer and nails and fastened the window immovably. He nailed shut the blinds, too, and when he came out of the house he halted before the Sailor's counter and scrutinized him closely.

"I don't know you, but I don't like you, my man," he said. "I find that you've paid your rent for three months in advance, and I suppose you would fight me in court if I tried to put you off these premises. But I give you warning now. At the end of your time you get out. And if you give me cause to dislike you more than I do, I'll find some way of making you sick of the neighborhood before!"

The Sailor looked hard at the boss, but said nothing, and after hesitating a minute, in which Ratigan looked as though he wished the man would start a row, he went his way, muttering.

After that there was always some evil-faced fellow lurking near the old house. The food and drink carried in to Belcher seemed to be sent over quite as frequently; but of course the Sailor could not see into the basket in which the man brought these rations from Ratigan's saloon.

Once he thought he heard somebody behind the door which led into the house under the high stoop, and which was shut away from the street by his stand. But he was not sure, of course, that it was Belcher trying to communicate with him, and although Pop-eye called his attention to the sound, too, he did not investigate.

Pop-eye watched his employer like a hungry cat at a rathole. There was little that the Sailor did which the street gamin did not see and digest, preparatory to reporting to Nick Carter. Even after he was relieved at night from his duties at the stand, Pop-eye was in the habit of lingering near the Jefferson Street house, on the watch for some manœuvre by the Sailor, and half expecting some night to see a party of the Red Necks sally forth from the Ratigan saloon and raid the oyster stand.

The second night following the day when Ratigan nailed shut the basement window and blinds, Pop-eye hung about the vicinity of the stand later than usual. He had seen at supper time two of the ringleaders of Ratigan's gang watching the busy Sailor serving his patrons, and by the furtive glances of this couple, and their whisperings together, the street boy figured that they had more than common interest in the place on this night.

There was a storm brewing. Now and then a damp wind wandered through the streets from the face of the river where the fog was gathering. Overhead the hurrying clouds hid stars and moon; and although the streets, with their many electric and gas lamps, did not suffer on account of the lack of light from the heavenly bodies, nevertheless a gloom settled upon the city.

The sudden coolness after the hot weeks of the summer and fall drove the tenement dwellers indoors. Before ten o'clock the block on which the old house stood was almost deserted.

Pop-eye was tempted to go home himself; but the lurking figures which evidently watched the little stand of his employer so interested him that he remained on guard.

There had not been a customer stop under the narrow awning for an hour. Now the gamin saw the Sailor begin to "batten down hatches," as he called it, for the night. Seldom had he closed the little shop so early.

Pop-eye made up his mind that, if his employer left the stand, he would follow and learn where he lodged. But after the lights were out the Sailor did not leave the place. The shutters were closed and everything was dark; but the Sailor did not come out.

Had the street gamin—or the others watching the stand—been able to see into it they would not have seen the Sailor stretched upon his berthlike shelf under the counter. He had other fish to fry!

He was down in front of the grated door before the basement entrance of the house, with an assembly of tools upon a bit of carpet which he had laid on the flagging. And he had arranged an electric hand lamp so that its round spot light was thrown directly on the lock of the grating and nowhere else. This could not be seen from the street, for the Sailor had cunningly built his stand so that the basement door was entirely hidden.

He worked rapidly, and although the lock was no easy one, he soon pushed back the bolt, reached for his oil cup, and dropped some of its contents on the hinges, and so drew the grating open without sound.

The inner door had both a patent and an ordinary house-door lock. The latter he could pick easily; but the former he had to cut out, and it was a work of some time to do this neatly.

When it was done, and the bolt removed, the Sailor—who seemed to be a mighty good mechanic, too!—produced a can of prepared fish glue and a brush and glued the block of wood he had sawed from the door into place again—and so neatly was it done that it would have taken close scrutiny to have discovered the break.

The door could still be locked on the lower, old-fashioned lock; the patent lock was the only one put out of commission. And a way was open into the house.

He gathered up his tools, wrapped them in the carpet, and stowed them away where even Pop-eye had not suspected their presence. Then he thrust the hand lamp into his pocket, seized something which usually reposed under the lunch counter, and the sight of which had already shot fear into the breasts of a number of the Red Necks, and so stepped down to the door again, passing into the house, closing and locking the door behind him.

His actions within the house showed that he was quite familiar with its layout. He went directly upstairs, not even using his lamp, mounting to the third story without hesitation.

There he flashed his light about the hall and centred it upon a closed door. The other doors stood wide open, giving a glimpse of barren and dirty rooms; but when he softly tried the knob of this shut door, he found it locked.

The grunt with which he hailed this discovery seemed to imply that it had not been unexpected. At least, he had brought his picklock with him, and he stooped now and manipulated the lock until it opened. He did this, too, with scarcely a sound.

The room was pitch-dark, but he listened and knew that somebody was breathing steadily—somebody asleep. His lamp came into commission again, and shooting the ray around the room, he finally spotted it on the face of the man asleep on the poor cot at one side.

On the table was a dry sandwich and several bottles of whisky and brandy. Ratigan was doing as cruel a thing to this old man Belcher as could possibly be done to a wretch of his kind. He was giving him barely enough to eat to keep him alive, and the stuff he gave him—the dry bread and the salt ham in the sandwich—would naturally add to his thirst.

There was a water pitcher in the room; but it lay empty on its side beside the man's cot. After sending the lamp's ray about the room to make these discoveries, the Sailor brought it back to Belcher's face again.

Asleep, there was something rather dignified in the countenance of the man with the missing thumb, after all. Had he not lived so many years in the gutter he might have been a respected, and respectable, old gentleman now. Indeed, as one of the women of the neighborhood had said to the Sailor, Belcher was scarcely past middle age.

Whatever had been the tragedy in his life, it was too bad that it had happened. Had he been in love with the pretty Adele Murchiston? And why had she married somebody else instead of him?

These were some of the Sailor's reflections as he looked at the man on the cot. Finally he crossed the room and touched him. Belcher awoke with a cry, but recognized his visitor almost instantly.

"How—how did you get in here?" he gasped. "Did Ratigan——"

"You can bet your life that Ratigan didn't give me permission, mate," said the visitor, in his hearty voice. "But I knowed you was shut up here and I wasn't going back on a friend——"

"Why were you so reckless as to come up here?" demanded Belcher. "You will get us both into trouble. Mr. Ratigan will punish us both severely."

"Shucks!" exclaimed the Sailor lightly. "You're not so afraid of him as all that, are you?"

"He is taking care of me——"

"Wouldn't you rather take care of yourself—and be free?"

"I'd have to go back to jail if he had not stood my friend."

"And that is a specimen of his friendly feeling toward you?" suggested the visitor, waving his hand—and the light—toward the table furnishings.

Belcher was silenced, but he looked at the Sailor doubtfully. The latter went back to the door and brought in a package that he had laid down there. When he unfolded the wrapper he displayed a big fried-oyster sandwich, a bottle of coffee that was still warm, and some hard-tack.

"Get the better of that, mate," he said. "We won't quarrel over your benefactor, Ratigan—whether he's good, bad, or indifferent; but as long as he keeps you locked up here I'm going to see that you get grub instead of booze."

Belcher took a reflective bite of the sandwich and, when he had masticated it, asked:

"Why?"

"Ain't I said I don't go back on a friend?"

"I'm not your friend. I'm nobody's friend," declared Belcher gravely.

"But you used to have friends—you had 'em in this very house," said the visitor, in his hearty manner. "You told me so yourself."

Belcher looked startled again for a moment. Then he nodded reflectively.

"I suppose I did say something to you about the Murchistons. Yes. They were my friends once."

"Billy's mother, they say, was a mighty pretty girl," said the Sailor, watching Belcher eat reflectively.

"She was a good girl—an angel!" ejaculated the man with the missing thumb warmly. "But her mother——"

He stopped, shaking his head.

"She was a Tartar; eh?"

"She was a strong character—an ambitious, headstrong woman," declared Belcher. "She has determined on a course in life for poor little Adele, and pleading, tears, prayers—not even love—could turn her from it."

The Sailor said nothing, but listened eagerly. Belcher was in a ruminative mood, and he seemed half unconscious of the presence of the visitor.

"Mrs. Murchiston had governed Mr. Perrine's household for so long that she thought she was in control of him, too. Indeed, the only way the old gentleman had of getting rid of her tyranny was by getting her out of his house. And then he professed to hate all womankind, and Adele came home from school, and Mrs. Murchiston declared she must have her daughter with her. Oh, she had planned it all years before, no doubt!"

"Planned what?" queried the interested Sailor softly.

Belcher did not appear to hear the question. He had stopped eating altogether, and sat dreamily gazing at a spot on the floor.

At the moment a sound in the lower part of the house startled the visitor. He sprang up, and Belcher came alive at the same instant.

"Somebody is coming!" whispered Belcher, awestruck.

A door had banged sharply. Now heavy boots could be heard tramping up the stairs!

CHAPTER VI.

HIDE AND SEEK.

The Sailor was not a man who lost either his nerve or his self-possession. He sprang up from the chair on which he had been sitting, and whispered warningly to the frightened Belcher:

"Hide that grub and coffee, my man! Tumble into bed again and make a noise like a man with a strangle hold on sleep. Never you fear for me; and if I get nabbed forget that you ever saw me before. That's all!"

He shut off his light, slipped softly to the door and drew it to behind him. Before the tramping feet started on the second flight he had manipulated the lock with his wire until the bolt slipped into place again and the door was locked.

He dropped then upon all fours and crept to the far end of the hall. There was a ladder here leading to the scuttle in the roof; but he knew better than to try that. The scuttle would be securely locked.

A flickering light shone on the landing, carried by the man mounting the stairs. To the Sailor's delight the visitor was alone; but when he came into view he proved to be the very plug-ugly whose face he had slapped the second day of his establishment of the eating stand below!

He did not want to be caught here by this fellow. Besides the smoky lamp, the man carried a revolver in his hand, and the Sailor knew well enough that the rough would use the gun on small provocation.

His own revolver was in his hand as he crouched there behind the ladder, but he had no desire to enter into a duel of bullets. This ruffian on the stairs was not alone; at least, his mates were not far behind him, the Sailor could be sure. Such fellows never work alone.

Whether his mates were in the house, or waiting outside, was a question the Sailor was unable to answer at the moment. He waited now, almost breathlessly, while the fellow approached the door behind which Belcher lay.

The ruffian set down his lamp and then stooped and applied his eye to the keyhole. He saw nothing, naturally, inside, and after a minute or so he drew out the key of the door which he carried, fitted it in the lock, and with some trouble opened the door.

When he stepped over the threshold with his lamp the man crouching behind the ladder stole softly down the hall, passed the open door without being discovered, and trod like a ghost down the stairway, keeping close to the wall so that the boards would not squeak.

He met nobody on the way down, although he half expected to have some other member of the gang pop out at him from one of the rooms on the lower floors. He heard, in fact, nothing from the man above. The house seemed empty.

He was halfway down the basement flight, already congratulating himself that he would be well out of the place and in his own locked stand in another minute, when a door below him suddenly opened and a glare of light shot into the basement hall.

The door was that of the front basement room where Belcher and he had first talked by way of the window, which window Ratigan himself had subsequently nailed up. And it was Ratigan's voice from this lighted room that the Sailor heard demand shrilly:

"Is that you, Bill?"

Naturally the unwelcome visitor to the old house refrained from replying. He had halted and stood against the wall, scarcely drawing a breath. Ratigan said to somebody behind him:

"I could have sworn I heard the stairs creak."

When he spoke the Sailor, his tread catlike, darted up the stairway and was safe for the moment. He knew that the speaker would have looked back over his shoulder in speaking to his companion.

He had, indeed, been unobserved; but Ratigan and his henchman were between him and the basement door; for they both came out of the room and stood in the hallway. At the same moment the man above came out of the apartment in which Belcher was confined and his lamp flashed over the railing.

"Hello!" he growled. "What's doing down there?"

"What have you found, Bill?" demanded Ratigan quickly.

"The bum was asleep. Nobody here."

"I swear I thought I heard somebody on the stairs just now," cried Ratigan.

"It warn't me," declared the man above.

"I guess you was mistaken, Mr. Ratigan," said the third man, who stood by the boss in the basement hall.

"Well, I don't know. It's funny—— However," added the politician suddenly, "nail up that door, as I told you."

In a moment the Sailor heard the sharp blows of a hammer below. He knew what the sound meant. A plank was being nailed across the basement door—the door by which he had entered.

The owner of the house had probably not discovered that the door had been forced; but he had come in to-night to make sure that there was no communication between the man keeping the lunch stand and Belcher.

And the visitor was trapped!

Already he had tiptoed to the front door—by which Ratigan and his two friends had entered—and he found it locked. Besides, there was the strong smell of a pipe about the door, and the Sailor heard a man left on guard outside moving on the stoop.

The situation was one that even a brave man would not have courted. And the Sailor was not looking for fight.

He had been merely angling for Belcher's confidence. He had no desire to pose as a hero in helping the old man that Ratigan was keeping so close in the house. He had an axe to grind with Belcher, as had Ratigan himself.

And so the Sailor did not care to fall into the hands of the politician and his henchmen. Three against one—and the three undoubtedly heavily armed—was a handicap too heavy to be chosen. Besides, the law would be on Ratigan's side. If he, or one of his assistants, shot the Sailor down there would be no redress. The latter had certainly burglarized the premises.

There was a door open beside the front entrance—the door into the front parlor of the old house. In these rooms had once been stored the loot of the Perrine mansion on Rutgers Street, when the Gypsy and his mates had robbed that house and stored the stuff here. There was only a little rubbish in the rooms now—nothing of value.

Nor was there any furniture behind which the Sailor might hide himself. He darted into the room, however, and slipped behind the door. From that refuge he heard Ratigan and the other man come up from the basement and meet Bill, who came down from above.

"If there's any sneak in the house," said Bill hoarsely, "he ain't got by me."

"I mean to have a thorough search made of the premises, just the same," declared Ratigan. "Did Belcher wake up?"

"Not till I stirred him wit' me foot," said Bill.

"He must be sleeping heavily these times," said Ratigan sarcastically. "You made noise enough going up the stairs to wake the dead."

"Mebbe he was playin' possum," grunted Bill. "But I didn't think the old bum had it in him."

"Who would have thought he had any spunk at all?" snapped Ratigan. "But he is certainly keeping away from the booze."

"What does he do with it all, then?" asked the third man.

"He always could drink a lot," hazarded Bill.

"I've brought him over enough to float a ship. I tell you he hasn't drunk it. What's become of the empty bottles?"

"There's plenty of such trash in the cellar," said Bill.

"I know Belcher," said the third speaker. "He'd been due for a fine case of the Willies by this time if he'd drunk half the stuff that's been handed him."

"I don't understand it," muttered Ratigan.

"That guy runnin' the oyster stand," suggested Bill, "has got something to do with it. Youse kin take my tip on that."

"I don't know. I can't make him out," said Ratigan. "But, come! Search the ranch. We've got all the entrances closed fast, I believe. If there is anybody in the place besides ourselves and Belcher we ought to find it out."

The third man suggested:

"We ought to have some system about it, sir. No use searching haphazard; eh?"

"Well, begin at the top of the house, then. You two fellows go up there and I'll stand here. You are sure nobody is with Belcher, Bill?"

"Of course I am!" growled Bill.

"Then, off with you. Take your lamp. I'll keep this one here. One of you stand in the upper hall while the other beats the rooms. And if you see anybody, don't be afraid to use your guns. I tell you we're within our rights if we shoot any trespasser on private property."

"If that blamed sailor is here I won't need no backing to do him up brown," declared Bill viciously.

This was pleasant to listen to. The Sailor, behind the door, kept very still indeed, and his eyes glistened.

The forces of the enemy were to be divided, and his chance for some move that might result in escape for him seemed advanced thereby. He waited, every nerve at tension, for Ratigan to be left alone in the hall. He believed he should be a match for Mr. Ratigan!

CHAPTER VII.

POP-EYE TAKES A HAND.

It had begun to rain—a fine, penetrating drizzle that drove most people in off the street and made the policemen seek shelter under awnings. And perhaps there were other persons who, [illegible] behind the barrels in front of a neighboring grocery, [illegible]

not chance to see an officer passing along the block for more than an hour.

He saw Ratigan and several of his men come over to the old house, however; and after standing on the step and talking a few minutes in low voices, the politician opened the door and, with two of the men, entered the building.

One man took up his stand on the stoop itself, lit his pipe, and remained on guard. The other rough hurried away.

Pop-eye wanted to know what was going on in the house, and he wanted to know this badly; but he did not see how he could find it out. He ran through the hall of the tenement house into the rear yard that joined the premises of the Ratigan place; but unlike Nick Carter, who had once done it, he could not mount the high fence which divided the two, and so come to the rear of the old house.

So he came back to the street and kept his eye glued on the fellow who guarded the door. He saw him crouching under the narrow shelter of the doorway, out of the rain; but Pop-eye was already saturated.

He wished with all his heart that the Sailor would show up. Was his strange employer calmly sleeping in the stand, or had he found some means of exit from it that the gamin knew nothing about?

This question was a puzzler, and the longer Pop-eye hung about the place with "nothing doing," the keener became his desire to investigate, and solve the mystery of his employer's remaining this night, of all others, inside his stand.

Perhaps, after all, the Sailor was one of Ratigan's men. Maybe his unfriendliness to the politician was merely assumed. There might be some game between them.

Nevertheless, the boy watched his chance, when the fellow on the high stoop was not looking, and crept along to the stand, getting under cover of the narrow awning that extended before the front of the built-up counter.

Right behind that matched-board partition the Sailor should be lying asleep. If he really was a seafaring person, a light tap on the planks should arouse him. Pop-eye tried it.

There was no immediate answer. After a minute he tried it again, and finally began scratching along the planks with a nail that he picked up. There was not a sound from within.

"Ar-r chee!" muttered Pop-eye. "De guy ain't deaf—not as I know on. There is sumpin' queer about dis—dat's right. He's got out of de joint; but how did he do it, wit' me on de job here? I ain't been out of sight of de place for a minnit—nix!"

The street gamin could see but one answer to this mystery. As the sailor had locked himself into the lunch stand, and he certainly had not come out upon the street by any usual means, then he had surely got into the Ratigan house.

How? That was certainly a puzzling question. Seldom in his short existence had Pop-eye been up against a more surprising situation.

If the Sailor was one of Ratigan's henchmen, why all this secrecy? And why was it necessary for him to meet the political boss in the old house on this night?

On the other hand, if he had some reason for getting into the house secretly, was the Sailor not now in grave danger? Pop-eye liked his employer for more reasons than one.

And how could he have got in? By the window that used to be unlocked—or by the doors that seemed to Pop-eye to be always doubly barred and bolted?

And while he was studying on this somebody suddenly gripped Pop-eye by the shoulder, jerked him to his feet, and twisted him about so that his captor could see into his face.

"Hey, you!" cried a rough voice, "what are you snoopin' around here for? What d'ye want?"

It was the fellow who had been left on guard at the door of the house. Pop-eye knew him to be one of the Red Necks and as mean a fellow as ever hung about a saloon corner.

"Lemme alone!" said the gamin sullenly. "I ain't a-hurtin' of youse."

"But I'm goin' to hurt you if you don't speak up!" declared the fellow, getting a twist on Pop-eye's collar. "Youse is de kid wot woiks for de mutt dat keeps de stand. Where is he?"

"How'd I know?" whined Pop-eye.

"Wot d'ye want here, den?"

"Ar-r, chee! If I tells yer it won't do youse no good——"

The fellow shook him hard and slapped him soundly on either side of his face. Poor Pop-eye bawled in good earnest.

"Don't youse give me no slack, kid!" commanded the rough. "I won't stand for it. Speak up!"

"What d'ye want me ter say?" sobbed Pop-eye, seeing that he was likely to be roughly handled if he allowed his tongue its usual license.

"Gimme de right steer," said the fellow. "You woik fer dis guy. Where is he ternight?"

"I dunno."

"We ain't seed him go out; but we can't raise him, nuther. Wasn't youse tryin' to get into de shack?"

"Yes, I was," gulped Pop-eye.

"And he ain't here?"

"I don't know whether he was or not," said the boy sullenly.

"What did youse wanter know for?"

Pop-eye appeared to be hesitating for an explanation of his action; but already his sharp mind had seen its way clear to a story that he believed might help him with the Red Necks.

"Speak up, yer little wretch!" ordered the fellow, shaking Pop-eye again.

"Let up!" squalled the boy. "I'll tell youse."

"Out with it!"

"An' go halvin's wit' youse, I s'pose," growled Pop-eye.

"Heh?"

"I seen where he hid his cush," said the gamin, grinning up at the rough, "and I was goin' ter make a touch. If he ain't in de box, I knows how ter git in an' swipe de money. D'ye see?"

"Say, kid, ye're all right," declared the fellow, at once loosening his grip on the boy's collar. "Goin' ter make a touch on yer own hook, was yer?"

"If de old man warn't round."

"Well, dat might not be a bad idea. How'd youse git in?"

"Huh! dis is my game, ain't it? Play fair!"

"Why, youse little snipe! I can break yer in two," declared the other, but chuckling now, and evidently favorably impressed by Pop-eye because he thought him a thief in embryo.

The man's little eyes twinkled enviously, however. He looked carefully around and then whispered:

"Aw, say, kid! yer all right; but youse can't pull off dis t'ing alone, yer know."

"I can if I'm let," grumbled Pop-eye sullenly.

"And wot erbout de bulls?"

"They don't seem ter be so frequent about here to-night," returned the street gamin, looking up at the fellow sideways, and grinning.

"Say! yer wise, kid."

"Betcher life!" admitted Pop-eye, nodding.

"But dere's somebody gotter be on de watch," whispered the man. "If youse can git inter de joint, do it, an' I'll stand here an' tip yer off when ter lay low. See?"

"Ar-r chee!" grunted Pop-eye. "An' wot d'youse want?"

"Divvy even," said the man, his eyes shining.

"Wot er chancet! An' me doin' all de woik?"

"Well, yer don't pull it off, den."

"No?"

"Dat's wot I said!" returned the fellow, with an ugly leer.

"Not ternight, mebbe."

"Nor no odder night!" cried the man fiercely. "Say! after ternight like enough dere won't be no stand here. D'ye see?"

Pop-eye thought he did. He believed that the Red Necks had determined to descend upon the little shop before morning and wreck it. Ratigan had likely given the word.

And meanwhile, where was the Sailor? What was he doing? How could Pop-eye help him?

The boy had a dim idea that, if he crept into the stand, he might be able to assist his employer. The latter must certainly be either inside the little structure, or in the house itself.

Pop-eye did know how to get into the place. He had not seen the structure built, nor had he worked about it for three weeks, or so, without knowing its weak points.

He came to a sudden resolution now. This rough would help him providing he promised a division of the contents of the cash drawer—a mythical drawer, by the way! Pop-eye "took a chance."

"Youse keep yer eye peeled, cullie," he said. "Tell me if anybody comes in sight—wheder it's a cop, or not. I ain't takin' no chances if I kin help it."

"Go ahead, kid," said the tough admiringly. "Ye're all ter de mustard."

Pop-eye may have appeared pleased by this flattery; but secretly he was only troubled by the mystery of his employer's disappearance. He had already made up his mind how to enter the locked and barred lunch stand.

He merely climbed the awning framework, ripped up a section of the sail-cloth roof, and slipped through. Knowing the place so thoroughly he was able to do this, and drop upon the floor of the little shop, in a few moments.

But he was fearful during these activities. Suppose the Sailor was playing possum all the time? Suppose he was there, with the big gun he always had by him, and should consider Pop-eye a reasonable target?

The boy breathed more easily, however, when he felt under the counter and found the berth empty. The Sailor was gone.

Pop-eye searched the little store, going down the steps to the basement door, and even trying the window that used to open. Then he scratched a match and saw some sawdust on the stone before the door.

That sawdust had not been there when Pop-eye left the lunch stand early in the evening. The sharp-eyed youngster lit several matches and examined the door through the gate of iron grillwork. Carefully as the Sailor had worked, Pop-eye began to suspect what the man had done closing the stand at ten o'clock.

And if he had broken his way into the old house like a burglar, the Sailor was surely not one of Ratigan's friends!

Pop-eye was convinced on that point. The Sailor had gone into the house; Ratigan and two of his henchmen had gone into the house, too. There would be—or already had been—a meeting of the two parties!

Pop-eye shivered and in his inmost soul there was a sudden giving way. A voice sounded behind the locked doors and then a hammering. The plank was being nailed across the door, thus cutting the Sailor off from escape, but to the gamin the blows were like the knell of doom.

What was happening to his friend and employer inside the old house he could not imagine. How he might help him he did not know. And in his own person he feared abuse, for the tough on the watch outside expected a piece of money from the cash drawer of the stand.

Sharp and shifty as the street gamin was, he was in a bad box now, and undecided as to how he should get out of it, escape the watchman, and bring help to his employer.

CHAPTER VII.

SINGLE-HANDED.

The shrewd little street gamin outside the house was much more disturbed in mind regarding the situation of his employer than was the latter himself.

Ratigan was left in the hall with a light while his two men went upstairs, to begin a thorough search of the house on the top floor. The unwelcome visitor knew well enough that the search would be thorough, and that, in all human probability, he could not escape observation.

Three men could guard the stairways and search the rooms in such a manner that nothing but a disembodied spirit might escape discovery. And the Sailor was a pretty solid individual!

He was not of a mind to stand still and wait to be captured, however. Before the two men had climbed the flights to the top floor he had determined upon his immediate course.

He was standing behind the open door of the main parlor of the house—the large front room on the street floor. By peering through the crack he could easily see Ratigan pacing the hall, smoking his cigar, and with his eyes for the most of the time turned up the stair flight.

He had set the lamp on a rickety chair that chanced to be in the hall. When Ratigan's back was turned to the open door the Sailor suddenly slipped out, tiptoed into the hall, and just before his enemy turned to retrace his steps, he was seized by both powerful hands of the seaman—one upon the back of his neck, the other on his throat.

The first squeeze took the starch right out of Tom Ratigan!

The cigar dropped from between his teeth, his eyes glared, and he fought vainly with clawing hands. His tongue protruded and the agony expressed in his features showed that his breath had been instantly shut off by the awful pressure.

As for making any sound, it was impossible! His antagonist had lifted him completely from the floor and he could only kick impotently.

In three strides the Sailor carried him back into the room. The capture had been made in silence and the time occupied was but a few seconds. As long as neither of the men above had looked down the stair well and seen the struggle, the Sailor was sure of his captive for some minutes at least.

He deliberately contracted Ratigan's windpipe until the man completely lost consciousness. Then throwing him down in an inert heap he gagged him with his own handkerchief, fastened both his wrists and ankles and then looked about for some hiding place for his captive.

Ratigan's eyes opened and he glared balefully at the Sailor about this time. But the latter paid mighty little attention to his prisoner, saving to be sure that his bonds were tight.

He hurried through the suite of rooms on the first floor. At the back there was an extension that had once been inclosed for the most part in glass; the windows were now tightly boarded up and there was some rubbish in the place.

Picking Ratigan up bodily the Sailor hurried him to this apartment, dumped him down in the dark with little regard for his comfort, and scurried back to the front hall to watch the proceedings of the two men above.

He was just in time, too, for already one of them was descending the stairs, and as the Sailor reached the hall, he cried out:

"Mr. Ratigan! Say!"

The Sailor hesitated an instant and then, in a voice rather like that of the captured boss, said sharply:

"Well?"

"Where was you?" queried the man. "We didn't hear you walking no more——"

The fellow had run down into the hall and now approached the doorway of the parlor. The Sailor stepped back out of sight and waited behind the door in the darkness. The unsuspicious man approached.

"I told Bill you was all right," began the man, and then he reached the doorway and stepped into the room.

The Sailor hurled himself forward, putting all his weight and force behind the fist which caught the other on the side of his jaw. Such a blow might have felled an ox!

The man went down, without even groaning. He crashed to the floor and rolled over against the wall, seeming to shake the building in his fall!

There was nothing to fear from him for some time, at least; but his fall had made more noise than the Sailor had desired. He had seen no other way of shutting him off suddenly, however. He was too heavy a man to be picked up and choked as Ratigan had been.

From above came a shout from the ruffian Bill:

"Wot's doin' down there? Hey, you, Mike! Is de boss all right?"

The Sailor did not think it wise to answer. He did not even touch the fallen man, or try to hide him. For the present he was sure of him as of Ratigan himself.

A rumbling volley of growls came down the stairway, as Bill started from the upper floor. The Sailor crept out into the lower hall, keeping out sight of the man above, and blew out the smoky lamp.

Instantly Bill stopped and cried out again:

"Say, what's doin' down there? Who's doused de glim?"

There was no answer; naturally the Sailor kept silence. Bill grunted again, but hesitated about coming farther. There was darkness and uncertainty below. Ratigan and the other man seemed to have disappeared entirely.

The Sailor heard the cocking of a revolver. He knew that the fellow held his gun ready to shoot.

If the gun went off it would more than likely call in help from outside. Although the Sailor had tackled

the problem of overcoming a trio of enemies, he did not want them to gain reënforcements, and he had no way of knowing how many more of the Red Necks were lurking outside the house, only waiting for an invitation to come in!

Now, in the darkness of the stairway—for Bill had left the second lamp above on the top floor—the Sailor began to climb upward, wriggling along close to the wall, and on his belly like a snake. He did not allow a button to scratch on the stairs, and he held his own revolver straight before him, and at arm's length.

Bill was swearing and muttering above. He evidently hesitated to fire the gun, and he dared not descend farther in the dark. It was a ticklish situation for both men.

Only, after all, the handicap was on Bill's side. He did not know what had happened to his friends, and he was not sure what sort of an enemy he was up against.

On the other hand, the Sailor knew exactly what he wanted to do and what he had to meet. He crept up the stairs slowly and noiselessly and came so near that he could hear the gasping breath of the ruffian who stood, clinging to the balustrade and trembling, uncertain as to what course to pursue.

Finally, in a panic of doubt and fear, Bill burst into a tirade of abuse of his friends! He called them everything he could lay his tongue to, and began to back up the stairway.

"What in thunder d'ye want me to do?" he howled. "I ain't goin' to search this old shanty over alone, and in the dark. What's got inter youse——"

He had just reached the top of the first flight again, still backing away from the presence that he could not see, but felt. The Sailor leaped forward and, having seized his own pistol by the barrel, he struck Bill's gun from his hand!

"Ow!" yelled the fellow.

He did not stop to clutch at his unknown antagonist. He dropped his gun and fled along the hall and leaped up the other flight of stairs, two steps at a time.

The Sailor, still in silence, was right at his heels. Bill, yelling with fear, tried to reach the lighted hall first; but halfway up this flight his antagonist reached him.

He seized Bill's ankle and flung himself back, dragging the frightened rough down the steps. Shouting and striking out madly with his fists, Bill came down the flight and rolled with the Sailor on the floor at the foot of the stairs.

In the struggle the Sailor lost his own weapon. Indeed, he found Bill as strong as a horse, and his fists landed several shrewd blows on the Sailor's head and shoulders before the latter could seize his wrists and so control the blows.

But he had caught a Tartar. He could keep Bill from striking him with his hands; but both his own hands were occupied and, although he was on top, and astride, of his antagonist, the Sailor merely held his own in the furious struggle. Besides, the noise made by their fall down the stairs had been heard without—or Bill's ferocious yelling had roused the watchman. A heavy pounding had begun on the street door.

CHAPTER IX.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

Bill was one of those would-be champions who ornament the pugilistic circles of the East Side. He was big enough, and beefy enough, to have made Jeffries himself sit up and take notice, only there was a chunk of yellow in him as big as a grapefruit, and when he had tried issues in the squared circle with a much smaller man, the nerve of his antagonist had put poor Bill out!

Had he managed to land uppermost in that sprawling tumble down the stairway, his weight might have given him the palm at the outset of his fight with the Sailor.

But the latter chanced to come down on top, and he kept that relative position during the entire struggle. The Sailor was no light weight himself, for he was stocky, although not overtall. But he was heaved up and thrown about a whole lot by the elephantine Bill.

And meanwhile the thumping on the first floor continued, while somebody bellowed to know what was going on inside. Ratigan carried the key of the premises and as Ratigan was lying, bound and gagged, in the back part of the house, the door was not likely to be opened at once.

But the noise might arouse other helpers of the local political boss. Late as it was Ratigan's saloon was, of course, open, and his bartender might have a duplicate key to the old house. At any rate, there was a likelihood of reënforcements entering at any moment, and the Sailor was very much alive to that fact.

Nevertheless, at the moment, he had his hands quite full with Bill. He could not let go either of the fellow's wrists, and he had to bear down on them with all his might to keep Bill from getting a hand near his mouth. Like the ruffians of his class, Bill would have set his teeth in the sailor's hand, or arm, had he got the chance. To these toughs, no hold is barred, and they fight with hands, feet, and teeth!

Nor did big Bill for a moment give up the struggle. Under the threat of a weapon he would have caved instantly; but he believed himself to be the superior of his antagonist in point of muscle, and they were fighting barehanded.

His roarings and curses, however, began to wind the bully. The Sailor did not waste a breath. The seconds passed minute long; but soon the man on top had the bully's arms at his sides and held him fast to the floor.

Meanwhile Bill heaved his huge carcass up and down and made the job as hard as possible for his antagonist, who, nevertheless, hung on. And the Sailor gradually worked his own knees forward until first one,

then the other, of Bill's hamlike hands were beneath his own knees and his weight was on them.

Instantly the Sailor showed his superiority. Bearing down with all his weight on the other's hands, he seized the bull-like neck of the man under him and choked him off in the middle of a complicated curse!

"Now, you rascal!" ejaculated the conqueror, for the first time speaking, "I'll keep your wind shut off till you stop kicking. Understand?"

Bill understood, all right! He showed his yellow streak by lying at once as quiet as a babe. He was afraid that his antagonist might make a mistake and choke him anyway!

And the Sailor did not let up at once. He knew that the rough was as treacherous as a snake.

"I'll hand you something that you will remember, too, if you misbehave!" threatened the Sailor, before he let go. Even in the darkness of the hall Bill knew that a clinched fist was poised over his face. He trembled and muttered that he would "be good."

"You better," said the Sailor. "And don't you open your head to call to your friends. Huh! I'll see to that, anyway."

He tore open Bill's coat, jerked off the neckcloth he wore tied loosely around his throat, and stuffed it incontinently into the fellow's mouth. Bill began to struggle and "biff!"—the Sailor landed a heavy blow on his jaw that made the bully groan.

"What did I tell you?" demanded his conqueror, roughly. "Keep still!"

Bill was actually sobbing when the Sailor rolled him over on his face. He was helpless now, and the seaman quickly knotted his wrists together behind him with stout cord that he had brought in his pocket. His ankles he served in like manner.

"Now, lie there!" ejaculated the master, rising and giving his enemy a parting shove with his foot that pushed him against the wall and out of the track. "There's three of ye! Will the others break in the door?"

The pounding had ceased; but the Sailor believed the silence was as threatening as the blows had been.

Certainly the friends of Ratigan outside would make another effort to enter.

But he heard another sound on the floor above—the floor on which Belcher was confined. The prisoner was rattling his doorknob and crying.

The Sailor bounded up the stairs and reached the door of the locked room in a moment.

"What's the matter, mate?" he demanded.

Belcher did not speak, but he could be heard weeping. The Sailor hauled out the instrument with which he had picked the lock, got down on his knees, and operated on the mechanism again until he was able to turn the knob and fling open the door.

"Oh, sir!" gasped old Belcher, seeing who his visitor was in the light of the dim lamp in the hall. "I thought they were killing you."

"Not yet! I've put three of them out for the time being—all that are in the house. But there's more outside; the clan is gathering, I suppose. There'll be a riot in the street if they don't break in."

"The Red Necks will surely kill you!" cried Belcher.

"Not if I can help it," declared the Sailor grimly. "But they are not overkind to you, my friend."

The old man shuddered. "Big Bill threatened my life just now. He swore I was playing the boss false."

"Now, Belcher, haven't you got most enough of these people?" demanded the other warmly. "I should think you would know by this time that they are not your friends. They would, indeed, be glad to have you dead. You are a witness that they fear—Ratigan fears you, especially."

"What—what do you know about it?" gasped Belcher, drawing back from him.

"Don't I read the papers? I know all about the murder of Prince Arib el Hanid, and I know that Ratigan was an accessory after the fact, at least, that he helped the Gypsy to evade the police, and that he was to share in the sale of the jewels stolen from the mummy belonging to the Perrine collection," said the Sailor earnestly.

"You lent yourself to the game, too, by letting Ratigan send you out of the city while he dressed the Gypsy up in your old clothes and let him take your place as caretaker of this old ranch. You are logically the State's witness. You have refused so far to tell all you know, or to admit the truth of these statements of mine. And why?

"Surely not out of love for the men who are treating you so mean here in this house. You got a brace on yourself in jail, but Ratigan is doing everything in his power to make you drink yourself to death before the trial comes off.

"In what sort of shape would you have been by now if I had not managed to smuggle a little decent grub in to you during this fortnight? Tell me that?"

"I—I am exceedingly obliged to you," murmured Belcher.

"You don't have to be. I'd have done the same, mate, for any unfortunate cuss I saw in your place. But I'd like to see you take a brace on yourself now. I'm going to make a break to get out of this house and, I tell you now, you're a fool if you don't follow me.

"Get out of Ratigan's clutches. Go to the district attorney and tell him how you have been treated. You'd much better be back in the jail, indeed, until the trial, than under Ratigan's protection.

"But as far as that goes, I'll find bail for you, old man," said the Sailor, suddenly falling into his old manner and slapping Belcher on the shoulder with heartiness. "You come with me now and you won't be sorry. You've lived decently in your time; you've been respected. I guarantee the very people who lived in this house, when you used to lodge here, respected you; eh?"

Belcher trembled, and he licked his pale lips before replying:

"I—I was a different man then."

"Be that same again!" cried his friend.

"Oh! it can't be! it is too long ago. I've gone too far. Why, sir, I was remarked by all in the neighborhood for my dress and deportment. I took pride in myself in those days—and well I might. The sweetest girl that ever stepped——"

A battering began on the front door again. Belcher cried out and tried to run back into the room he had occupied.

"No, you don't, my hearty!" said the Sailor, seizing him by the arm. "I'll save you in spite of yourself—and from yourself, too, if need be!"

"They will break in the door!" gasped Belcher.

"Then we won't be here," declared his friend. "Come on!"

He did not try the rear of the house for exit. There was only the basement door at that side, anyway, and he seemed to know that since Nick Carter had once made an entrance by that means the door had been boarded up completely.

Instead, the Sailor led the shaking Belcher down the front stairways, carrying the lamp in one hand, and glancing at both the bound Bill and the senseless man in the front parlor on their way. Ratigan he paid no attention to.

The fact that big Bill saw Belcher going with the Sailor clinched the witness' weak intention. He could not back out now. The Red Necks would be sure that the weak old man had it in his heart, at least, to get away.

But he had no idea in his poor, weak mind how his new friend was to get him out of the clutches of the Ratigan gang. The Sailor seemed quite confident of his own movements, however.

He led the way down into the front basement, to the door, across which Ratigan had ordered his henchman to nail a plank. The hammer was lying on the floor where the man had dropped it, and the seaman picked up the tool and went boldly to the barrier.

He started one end of the plank with some difficulty, and finally pried it completely away from the door frame. In a jiffy the door was undefended.

The noise ceased in the street—at least, the pounding on the front door had stopped. But those outside must have heard the sounds the Sailor made in wrenching off the plank.

He seemed to be quite careless of the danger without, however. He quickly picked the lower lock of the basement door, pushed back the latch, and swung it open. Only the barred gate was between them and the lunch stand. That was dark and the Sailor shot a ray of light from his hand lamp into the place.

There, within the radiance of the light, crouched Pop-eye, a short club clutched in his hand, a bruise over his right eye, and his clothing half torn from his body!

"Well, young fellow!" exclaimed the Sailor, under his breath. "What are you doing here?"

"Say! Don't youse know dat de Red Necks is after youse? Wotcher done ter Ratigan. They'd had dis yere stand torn ter pieces if dey didn't t'ink I had a gun," cried Pop-eye, wiping blood from his nose upon his torn coat sleeve.

"How came you here?" demanded the Sailor again, and he spoke so sternly that the boy realized that he had managed to deeply offend his strange employer.

"Aw, say! I wanted ter know what was doin'," grumbled Pop-eye. "Was dere any harm in dat?"

"There was. You see it yourself, now, I guess, by the looks of you," and the Sailor looked at him grimly while he manipulated the lock of the gate. "Come! let us hear what you have done."

Thus adjured Pop-eye recounted how he had been caught "rubbering" about the stand by the Red Neck left on watch, and what he had told him about robbing the mythical cash drawer.

Once in the stand, and finding it empty, and his employer probably gone into the house, Pop-eye had decided that he must slip out and get the police interested. But to slip out without falling into the clutches of the tough who had attached himself to Pop-eye's raid on the stand was impossible.

The boy received a terrible beating because he had not brought out the money he had promised, and had finally wriggled back into the stand and threatened to shoot the Red Neck if he tried to force his way into the shanty.

Then more of the gang appeared. Ratigan had evidently sent for them before entering the house himself, expecting trouble from the keeper of the lunch stand before the night was over.

But instead of attacking the stand, the gang wanted to find out what had happened to Ratigan, big Bill, and the other. Pop-eye said they were on the steps now waiting for somebody to bring keys of the house. The fact that neither of their three friends had answered their demands for admission had puzzled and frightened the roughs.

"And dey'll pull dis shack down erbout me ears in a minnit!" concluded Pop-eye.

The Sailor shrugged his shoulders. He looked from the face of the blood-besmirched boy to the trembling Belcher.

"Well, it does look like trouble, doesn't it?" he muttered.

CHAPTER X.

THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS.

And while they looked at one another and hesitated, there was a crash against the front of the lunch stand that splintered the shutters. Another followed, and the end of a beam came through.

Several of the Red Necks had gotten impatient, and finding the beam in front of a building being torn down farther along the block, they had used it as a battering-ram.

A roar of satisfaction rose from the mob. Then, also, sounded the cry:

"Wait! here comes Curley wid de keys!"

The Sailor and his companions were between two perils then. The mob might break in the lunch-stand front and get at them; or they could open the house door and reach them from the rear.

Pop-eye naturally looked to his employer for leadership; poor Belcher was in an utter funk and could not be depended upon for a thing! The Sailor manipulated the lock of the barred door, swung it open, and beckoned Pop-eye in.

"Let 'em smash the stand if they like," he growled. "I ought to leave you to be smashed, too, you young sculpin! You should have been at home and abed instead of sticking your nose into this row.

"Come in here. Wait till I lock these doors again. Keep your eye on the old man," he added, in a whisper, to the abashed and sniveling boy. "We must keep him with us—understand?"

Pop-eye did not understand; but he realized that there was a compelling note in this man's voice, just as there was in Nick Carter's. He wished with all his heart that Nick, or some of his assistants, were here. Pop-eye had more faith in them than in the police, whom, he was pretty sure, would be a long time coming here when the Red Necks were on the rampage.

The Sailor quickly locked both basement doors. The battering of the lunch stand had not recommenced. It was evident that the gang waited for the front door of the house to be opened.

The Sailor seized the hammer and plank with the nails still in it, and calling to Belcher and Pop-eye to follow him, he darted up into the front hall. Belcher was not anxious to follow; he had crouched down into a corner, and Pop-eye stirred him up with a hearty kick.

"Say! don't youse hear de boss?" cried the street gamin. "Yer wants ter foller him close't—see?"

So he urged the man with the missing thumb upstairs. Already their leader was at the door. There were voices outside and somebody was fumbling with the handle.

The heavy plank the Sailor had brought was only splintered on one end. It was as strong as ever. The Sailor clapped it diagonally across the door and began to drive the big nails home with powerful strokes of the hammer.

With the latter implement he had found a handful of twenty-pennies, and he drove every nail home to the head before he stopped. Meanwhile, the man outside had got his key into action; but, of course, the door was effectually barred.

The roar of voices in the street was deafening. The whole neighborhood was doubtless aroused; but with the Ratigan gang in the majority nothing was done to quell the disturbance. Probably the riot was not even reported at the nearest police station.

Nobody had thought to bring the lamp upstairs and the Sailor had used his electric light while working, Pop-eye holding the torch. Now, taking it himself, the Sailor flashed it around the hall. There was a movement and a groan from the parlor. The fellow he had hit on the point of the jaw was coming back to life!

"They will be a few minutes breaking into this joint," said the Sailor. "Meanwhile, it might be well to look over the prisoners."

He stepped into the parlor. The tough rolled over with another groan and struggled into a sitting posture. He looked up vaguely at his conqueror and hung onto his jaw.

"You took the count," said the Sailor. "Now, how do you feel?"

The man merely scowled and snuffled. Pop-eye had come in and Belcher peered fearfully around the edge of the door.

"Here!" ejaculated the Sailor, tossing the boy some cord. "Let's see how nicely you can trice up a man. Don't make the cords any tighter than you can help, but hold your man!"

The fellow began to swear and strike feebly at Pop-eye when he approached. Instantly the Sailor threw him on his back, seized his own neckcloth, and tied it tightly across his mouth.

"Now, go ahead, kid," he said.

This treatment seemed to take much of the fight out of the prostrate one. While Pop-eye bound him the Sailor handed Belcher the hand lamp to hold, and he walked through to the little room behind, where Ratigan lay.

He had to light a waxlight to see the fallen political boss. Ratigan's eyes glared red murder! It would go hard with the Sailor, he knew, if ever he was in the saloon keeper's power again.

"But I reckon we'll just about square things up with each other this time, Mr. Ratigan," declared the Sailor, feeling of his prisoner's bonds. "Your gang is going to smash up my lunch stand, and that finishes my experiment here. As for you—well, I've got Belcher!" he whispered in the boss' ear.

At the moment there was a roar of voices from outside, the thumping began on the front door again, and a scream from Pop-eye echoed through the old house. The Sailor darted back to the front parlor.

The third prisoner seemed well bound, and the boy and Belcher were in the hall, both hanging over the banister of the basement stairway. From below a glare of light shot up into their faces and the Sailor smelled smoke.

"Great heavens! what's up now?" he demanded, seizing on the boy.

"Dat blasted lamp!" cried Pop-eye, almost in tears again. "De one we left down dere. It's blowed up and he hull place is afire!"

The statement did not appear to be overstrung! Once the Sailor started to descend the stairway; but it did not need Pop-eye's and old Belcher's pleadings to hold him back. A burst of flame met him like the breath of a furnace.

"The house is doomed," muttered he.

For a moment he seemed undecided in the course to take. And there was good reason for this indecision.

Outside the mob was roaring threats, for it evidently believed that Ratigan and his two henchmen had been overcome by the enemy and that the fire was started to destroy them.

Should the Sailor and his companions seek to escape by the front door, the gang would tear them to pieces before any explanation could be made.

Nor was there time to herd Ratigan, big Bill, and the third man to the front door, and make them stand sponsor for the Sailor and his companions. The fire was leaping up the stairway and would soon envelop this first floor, too.

To tear off the plank he had nailed across the front door and venture out into the arms of the mob was not to be thought of for a moment. There was, of course, no escape from the rear, for the fire already controlled the basement.

"It's de roof for ours, boss!" squealed little Pop-eye, who seemed to have read the Sailor's mind in this moment. "Yer got dat hammer. We kin knock the scuttle off, can't we?"

"Oh, we'll be burned alive!" groaned Belcher.

"Cheese it!" cried Pop-eye. "Don't take it so serious."

"You're all right, Pop-eye!" declared the Sailor. "Wait till I give these fellows a show for their white alleys."

He dashed through the parlors again and, seizing Ratigan, dragged him out into the bigger room and cut his bonds.

"The house is on fire, mister!" he told the boss. "Your gang will let you out the front door if you give 'em the chance. Can you stand?"

He helped the saloon keeper to his feet, but he was careful to "frisk" him for weapons before he left him alone. Ratigan carried a dangerous-looking gun, which the Sailor added to his own armament.

Back he ran to the fellow Pop-eye had tied and quickly released him. Belcher still held the electric hand lamp; but the glare of the flames from below was now lighting the halls and stairways.

"Here! Give me the hammer!" commanded the leader.

He seized it from Pop-eye and went at the plank that he had just nailed so securely across the front door.

"Upstairs with you fellows!" he ordered. "It'll be right with you. Look out for that fellow on the next floor."

Meanwhile he was loosening the plank, and somebody shook the door from outside and yelled:

"Come out! come out! you're burning up!"

"Thanks for the information," muttered the Sailor. "You're no fireman, though. When the department arrives the police will have to drive back the mob. We'll have a chance then!"

Ratigan came staggering into the hall. The plank was well loosened then. The Sailor pointed to the door, slapped the dazed politician on the back, and darted up the stairway after his two companions, hammer in hand.

He found them examining big Bill. The noise and the smell of smoke had evidently warned the bully of the peril and he had been rolling about the floor in an agony of fear, ending by almost strangling himself in the cloth that gagged him.

The Sailor quickly released him, and Bill struggled to his feet without assistance.

"What in thunder's the matter?" he roared. "Youse fellers are burning up de ranch! Belcher, ye old bum! I'll have yer life fer dis!"

He lurched toward the trembling old man, evidently choosing the enemy least able to defend himself. But the Sailor dropped the hammer, seized Bill by the collar, and whirled him around, facing the stairway.

The bully began to bawl for help, but his conqueror paid no attention to his prayer. The halls were rapidly filling with smoke and the glare of the flames increased momentarily. Their crackling drowned the noise of Bill's friends entering the front door, too.

The Sailor forced the big fellow to the top of the flight, Bill pleading to be released. He thought he was to be flung down into a ravening furnace.

"On your way!" squealed Pop-eye, in delight. "Let him have it, boss!"

The Sailor seemed nothing loath. He threw Bill forward by the neck, and as the bully dove headlong down the stairway, he reached him under the coat with a well-directed and earnestly delivered kick!

Big Bill did not touch a stair tread on his way down.

"No more fooling here," said the Sailor, whirling about and pushing Belcher and Pop-eye before him toward the upper stair flight.

They left the enemy to their own devices. The smoke began to shift and thin out a little, so that they knew the front door was open and escape easy for Ratigan and his men. In another moment, however, the flames had swept into that lower hall and cut off their own retreat had they dared face the mob in the street.

"The roof is our only hope," muttered the Sailor, and he hurried his companions up the stair.

Pop-eye's thin face wore a grin that showed his uneven teeth and made his light-colored orbs bulge more than usual. He was scared, but he had learned to cover fright by that grin—"a fighting grin." Pugilists sport it in the ring.

Poor old Belcher, however, was quite done up. He was pushed up the final few steps by the Sailor, and then dropped in a heap, coughing and choking from the smoke that had risen, and was thick, on the top floor.

The ray of the electric hand lamp illuminated the

place to some extent, however. Through the smoke the seaman sprang up the ladder, hammer in hand, while Pop-eye turned the spot of the light on the fastenings of the scuttle.

There were bolts, rusted into their sockets, as well as a formidable padlock. The sailor attached the bolts, one after the other, and drove them back, or smashed the sockets.

Then he forced the fish tail of the hammer into the hasp which held the padlock, and wrenched at it with all his strength. The wood held it firm and for several moments he could not pry the fastening loose.

But finally it gave, and with such unexpectedness that the Sailor lost his balance and nearly fell off the ladder. He recovered himself in a moment, however, climbed up a step or two, and heaved his broad shoulders against the scuttle. It was wrenched free, flew out upon the roof, and their way to escape was open!

CHAPTER XI.

ON THE ROOF.

Pop-eye dragged Belcher up from the floor and pushed him up the ladder after their leader.

"Ar-r chee!" he exclaimed. "Youse is de bummest old critter ever I see. W'en de chanct is passed youse ter skiddoo, yer don't know enough to take it."

"But where will we go?" cried the man with the missing thumb. "This building will burn up. The roof will burn as well——"

"Ar-r chee! w'en de roof's afire, we kin fly, can't we?" demanded he of the staring orbs. "Git up dere wit' cher!"

The smoke was sucked up through the scuttle now and they all came out, coughing and choking. The Sailor slammed on the scuttle again so as to stop the draught and keep the fire down if possible. But they could hear the windows popping downstairs, and the crackle of the flames drowned the roar of voices in the street.

When he was once out, Pop-eye ran to the front of the building and craned his head over to look down upon the throng. The glare of the fire below revealed the mass of humanity which filled the street. In the distance sounded the clang of the fire apparatus on its way to the scene.

"Wotcher going ter do, boss?" demanded the street gamin of his employer. "Goin' ter let de firemen rescue us?"

"That is not a surety, is it?" queried the Sailor. "Besides, I want to take Belcher with me. You understand that?"

"I understand wot yer say," grumbled Pop-eye. "But I dunno wotcher mean."

The other chuckled. "All right," he observed. "You'll see the point later. I'd rather get away from this place without the help of the firemen or the police. And it looks to me as though they'd have a hard time of it to help us, anyway."

The fire was burning fiercely at the front of the house. It had burst from the lower shuttered windows and now and again the flames leaped above the coping of the roof. Pop-eye had been quickly driven back from his point of observation.

"Say!" he squealed. "I don't wanter stand here an' roast, boss."

The Sailor was looking about him keenly, seeing that the surrounding buildings were being revealed in the glare of the increasing fire. On either hand was a taller building, constructed against the walls of Ratigan's old house. But there were no windows overlooking this roof, and the roofs of the adjoining structures were two stories above where the Sailor and his companions stood.

They were three stories from the ground—in front shut off by the fire, and the addition at the back two stories down and much too far to jump—the walls of the buildings on either hand were sheer—no foothold on their surfaces.

It was a situation to breed fear in any person's soul. Old Belcher was abject; but Pop-eye's fright came of inaction. Give him something to do and he would immediately forget the peril.

The Sailor saw that there was no wire attached to this roof. There was no such means of escape by casting off a length of the wire and lowering oneself to the ground thereby.

He stepped to the rear coping and looked down upon the narrow roof of the overset—that addition at the rear of the first, or parlor, floor, in which Ratigan had lain a prisoner. There was light issuing from the chinks of the boarding which had been put up in place of the broken windows. The fire was eating that way and the roof of the addition was already beginning to smoke.

But from that ell roof to the back yard of the house would be but a drop of ten feet, or so. There was, however, twenty feet between the edge of the coping and the shed roof.

Belcher knelt on the gravel and wrung his hands, making little outcry, but evidently seeing no hope. Pop-eye glared at the Sailor, ready to do his bidding, whatever it might be, but expecting him to suggest the way of escape.

Suddenly the Sailor stepped back to the scuttle and threw it off. A rush of smoke escaped, in the form of a balloon, and black. But after the first puff of it, it thinned and no flames followed.

"We want this ladder!" ejaculated the Sailor.

He laid hold of the top rung and tried to wrench it free; but it was fastened.

"Where's that hammer—do you know, Pop-eye?" he demanded, turning to the boy.

"Yep," declared the gamin.

"Where?"

"I kin put me hand right on it," declared Pop-eye eagerly. "Gimme a show."

"Hold on! don't you go in there," said his employer. "I'll get it myself."

"How'll you do that if I don't tell you where it is?" queried the urchin, with a grin. "Lemme go!"

"Tell me!" commanded the Sailor!

"Nix. I'm goin' ter git it meself," cried Pop-eye. "I'm quicker an' smaller dan you be. See?"

He slipped by the man before the latter could stop him and darted down the ladder into the smoke.

"Come back here, you little sculpin!" roared the Sailor.

The smoke rolled up from the hatchway and there was a growing rosy glow below. The fire was mounting higher, and with the scuttle removed the draught would surely hasten the conflagration.

The Sailor's face was very grave. The boy had gone into extreme peril, for it would be easy to become bewildered down there in the smoke. He was about to venture upon the ladder himself when out of the smoke popped the grimy face of the lad.

"Here—here—it—is—boss!" he gasped, flinging the hammer at his employer's feet.

He would have keeled over and slipped backward down the ladder had not the man caught him quickly.

"Good boy!" cried the Sailor heartily. "Sit down there and get your breath. Let me have that hammer!"

Half a dozen blows broke away the ladder, and he was able to reach down and draw it through the scuttle hole. He did not stop to cover the aperture now. The flames themselves followed the ladder out and it was too hot to approach the place again.

"Come on!" called the Sailor, and ran to the rear edge of the roof with the ladder in his hands. It was at least eight feet long, and it was of some weight. In his excitement, however, the man seemed endowed with increased muscular powers.

Pop-eye was right at his elbow. He had recovered from his plunge into the smoke and was as lively as a cricket.

"Where's Belcher?" demanded his employer.

"De old bum is handy."

"Get him here," said the Sailor. "We've got to act quick now. No time to lose."

The gamin went after the old man and urged him to the roof coping.

"Pay attention to me, now Belcher!" cried the Sailor sternly.

"Ye—yes, sir," stammered the old man.

"I'm going to lower this ladder over the edge here. I'll lie across this coping on my chest and the ladder will hang from my hands—d'ye see?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you are to climb over the edge here, slide down my arms and the ladder, hang from the final rung, and drop!"

"Oh, sir, I——"

"You do as I say!" commanded the Sailor, already lowering the ladder. "This thing is eight feet long. The bottom rung will be near ten feet from the roof of the shed. Your boot soles won't be more than four feet, or four and a half, from the shed roof. It won't hurt you."

"But, I beg of you——"

"Shut up!" roared the Sailor angrily. "Make him climb down, Pop-eye."

"Git er move on, cullie!" advised the gamin, hustling the old man to the edge of the roof. "Aw, say! wot kind of er bloke be youse? De boss is riskin' his life ter save youse. Git er move on, can't youse?"

Tremblingly the old man crawled over the edge of the coping, let himself down carefully upon the ladder, and then seized the Sailor's arms. Perhaps the feel of the taut muscles under his hands gave Belcher courage.

He carefully went down the ladder which hung, with his weight, from the muscular hands of the man above him. It was a feat not easy of performance, although Belcher was no heavy weight. But the sway of the ladder and the man's body on it added not a little to the strain.

Slowly Belcher slid down. Now his feet were on the bottom rung. He hesitated when his foot found no further stable rest below.

Pop-eye peered down at him and threatened him with the hammer in his hand.

"Go on, youse!" he bawled. "I'll let youse have de hammer in de coco. Yer make me sick!"

The Sailor did not speak. He had all he could do in holding the ladder.

A slight mischance—a slip, indeed—would hurl ladder and man into the court below. Or their weight might even draw the Sailor over the coping and he, too, would plunge headfirst to the shed roof, and rebound to the flagged yard!

Belcher, urged by the threats of Pop-eye, continued to lower himself on the ladder. His feet beating the air helplessly, however, set the ladder to swaying, and the strain on the Sailor's shoulders increased so greatly that he groaned.

"Drop, yer miserable old bum!" bawled Pop-eye down at the frightened man. "Youse wanter break de boss' neck; heh?"

The gamin was fairly jumping up and down on the coping, looking like an imp in the smoke, and with the glare of the rising fire for a background.

The boy was too excited to realize that he was advising the old man to risk his own life and limb. He had not reached the last rung of the ladder, but hearing what Pop-eye said, he actually did let go his hold, and dropped!

Fortunately the shed roof was almost flat. He landed squarely, and although he crumpled pantingly to the roof itself, being unable to withstand the shock upright, he did not roll over backward and so plunge into the yard below.

He was safe. They could see him down there in

the rosy billows of smoke that were puffing through the cracks between the boarding.

The Sailor recovered his speech instantly.

"Be quick, boy!" he commanded. "You are lighter and will give me less trouble. It will be something of a drop for you."

"Ar-r chee!" cried Pop-eye. "Wotcher goin' ter do yourself?"

"None of your business! get a move on you!" commanded the Sailor, in a rage.

"Say, boss, youse kin larrup me if yer wants. But I don't see how yer goin' ter git down yerself," whined Pop-eye.

"What is that to you?" snarled the man. "Get on with you!"

"Who's going ter hold de ladder for yourself?" shouted Pop-eye, himself in a rage of fear.

"Get down, you little fool! I am going to drop the ladder and you are going to catch and steady it. Then you will lean it against the house wall, giving it a good slant. I shall hang from this coping by my hands and drop upon the ladder. It will not be much of a drop—I have performed the like before. Now, will you get a move on you, you little pest?"

Sobbing, and not at all assured that the thing could be done, the boy went over the edge of the roof, clung to the Sailor's arms, and so slid down onto the ladder.

He was quick as a cat. In less than a minute he had slid to the very end of the ladder and dropped safely onto the roof below

"Git out the way, you boob!" Pop-eye bawled to Belcher. Then looking above he shouted: "Let the ladder come, boss! Dere ain't no time to lose. Dis roof is afire already."

The man above knew this fact without being told. His glaring eyes had seen the flames beginning to lick the edge of the roof of the shed. The moments now were very precious if he would escape himself from his present perilous situation and, finally, save the lives of his two companions as well.

The immediate task he had set for himself was no easy one. A circus acrobat might have shrunk from the attempt, unless there was a net to be used in the act.

But there was no net there. First he must drop the ladder in such a way that it would not lean outward and be carried over the edge of the shed roof. For Pop-eye's small strength could not hold it, did it start to fall in that direction.

He shouted to Pop-eye to stand aside. Then he swung the foot of the ladder outward, judging his distance carefully in the small light of the fire, and finally let go of it.

The foot struck the roof squarely, and the upper end fell in toward the house. But it began to slide along the house wall, and had Pop-eye not been there to catch and steady it, it would have fallen and the Sailor would truly have been left marooned, and without escape, on the coping of the upper roof.

CHAPTER XII.

POP-EYE IS AMAZED.

The seaman wasted no time. When he saw the ladder was steady, and leaned at the proper angle against the house wall, he turned about and began to lower himself over the edge of the coping.

Meanwhile Pop-eye had managed to stir old Belcher up to take a hand in the proceedings. He placed the man on one side to hold the ladder steady, and he stood on the other. The ladder, the boy saw, was directly under the swinging feet of the Sailor as the latter lowered his muscular body down from the edge of the roof.

To drop and land so firmly upon the ladder that he would not slip, or fall backward, was a chance only. It might be done; but the likelihood was all against such a result.

Nevertheless the Sailor was coolness itself. The fire might have been a mile away, instead of the blistering heat and smoke of it rising into his face as he looked down.

To wait for the firemen to release him would have been to sit down and accept a most awful form of death as his portion. Already the front of the building was a mass of flame, and the hosemen had not reached the roofs on either side of the burning structure. Nobody, in fact, had seen the trio of escaping comrades.

No. This was the only path to escape open to the Sailor. He realized all its danger. But he knew, too, that he had, in all proabibility, made sure of the escape of his two companions.

Even if he missed his footing and fell backward off the ladder to the paved courtyard, Pop-eye and the man with the missing thumb could easily hang from the edge of the lower roof and so drop to the ground without much injury.

He had done his work and done it well. He did his best now to perform the acrobatic feat that seemed well-nigh impossible.

Neither the flames and smoke, nor the anxious faces of the two below, afforded him the first tremor. He saw that he was poised directly over the ladder and, when this was so, he cried:

"'Ware out below!"

Then he dropped.

The balls of his feet landed upon the second round of the ladder. One slipped and dropped to the space between that rung and the third; but the Sailor had spread abroad his hands and leaned toward the wall, and this sprawling position saved him from going over backward.

In a moment he recovered his poise and set his foot firmly on the lower rung; then he went down, and down, backward and carefully, until the top of the ladder came in reach of his hands, and—he was safe!

"Ar-r chee!" piped the voice of the street gamin, in admiration. "Yer a wonder, boss! yer a wonder!"

"Thanks, Pop-eye," returned the man, chuckling.

"Now, old man," he added, to Belcher. "What do you think? Shall we escape, or not?"

"Oh, sir! you certainly can accomplish wonders."

"Sure! Now, I mean to lower this ladder again to the court. The fire is less active over this corner. I can set the ladder firm, I think, from up here. Then I'll lower you onto the ladder and you can get down. Pop-eye and I will follow."

Despite the fact that the danger from the fire was growing, Belcher was cooler than before. This was because of the influence of his companions.

He allowed the Sailor to help him down after the ladder was lowered, and in a few seconds he stood safely on the flagging of the yard behind the burning house. The Sailor swung Pop-eye down upon the ladder, too, and before the boy was off it, he dropped himself and came sliding safely to the ground.

The house was a mass of flame inside. They were shut off from Jefferson Street by it, and from the yards on either side by high fences. A lower fence divided this yard from the one behind the old Perrine house on Rutgers Street.

"That's our way out, boys," said the Sailor, nodding at this latter barrier. "Here! Give me the ladder."

He dragged it across the yard, set it up against the fence, and mounted quickly to the top, straddling the rail. Then Pop-eye and Belcher followed him, got over on the other side, and sitting astraddle as he did, the Sailor lowered the man with the missing thumb down into the other yard.

Pop-eye followed, and quickly his employer descended himself. They were neatly out of their predicament, and the Sailor certainly smiled broadly when they all three walked to the basement door of the Perrine house.

They did not have to knock, for the couple who cared for the house now had seen their final descent of the fence and ran to the door. Pop-eye stepped forward to explain, but the woman seemed to recognize the Sailor, much to the boy's surprise.

"Oh, sir! is it you?" she cried. "And were you really in that burning house?"

"We were all in it it, Mrs. MacCormack," declared the Sailor. "And a sweet time we had getting out of it. The house is bound to go, I reckon—it's fortunate the wind is in the other direction."

"And the boy was with you!" cried the good woman, and, seizing upon Pop-eye, to his evident disgust. "You poor dear! And you are bruised. Look at his nice clothes, Michael—all torn."

"He had better been at home and in bed," said the Sailor, with a short laugh. "But I must confess he has acquitted himself like a man. He deserves credit for that, at least."

Pop-eye was big-eyed with wonder. He stared from the woman to his employer.

"Say! do dese folks know yer?" he asked, sidling over to the Sailor.

"Don't you see they do."

"And does old Perrine know yer?"

"He does."

"Why," said the woman, laughing, "he often came in here to change his clothes—him and the other gentleman, too."

Pop-eye did not pay any attention to her. His eyes were fixed on his employer.

"Den youse was after old Belcher all de time?" he queried, with a jerk of his thumb toward the much disturbed old fellow who had retired to a chair that the woman had given him.

"I have been trying to make a friend of Mr. Belcher," admitted the other.

"And so is Nick Carter," muttered the boy. Then he swung suddenly on Mrs. MacCormack. "Say! who's de odder guy?" he cried.

The woman stared at him, and Pop-eye had to explain: "Youse just spoke erbout anudder guy comin' here to change his clo'es. Whachu mean by that? Old Perrine ain't lettin' youse make a lodgin' house of dis ranch, I bet!"

"I had my instructions from Mr. Perrine, you may believe, young man!" ejaculated Mrs. MacCormack, with some heat.

Just then her husband opened the door and ushered in another person from the front part of the house.

"Here is the other gentleman," he said, chuckling.

Pop-eye whirled about and confronted the newcomer. He gasped, his eyes bulged more than ever, and he hung onto the back of the chair near which he stood.

Belcher uttered an exclamation of surprise, or fear, too. And their amazement was reasonable, for the newcomer was the exact counterpart of the man who had led them out of the fire trap and down from the roof of the blazing house on Jefferson Street!

Pop-eye's gaze flashed from one to the other of the sailorish-looking individuals. Their height was, to all appearances, the same; so were their features, and certainly their clothing was the exact counterpart of each other's garments!

Pop-eye had recovered his breath. He smote his hands together and stamped in anger on the floor.

"Ar-r chee!" he cried, in rage and disgust. "Youse

guys has made a boob of me. An' me runnin' clean up ter Madison Av'noo ter tell youse erbout de very t'ings youse was a-doin' yerself.

"You're Mr. Chickering Carter," he declared, pointing a grimy finger at the man who had come in; and then whirling on his employer, he added: "And youse is Nick Carter himself, an' I never tumbled to it! Ar-r chee! I'm a boob fer fair."

"Don't take it to heart, Pop-eye," said Nick Carter, chuckling. "If we couldn't fool you, as well as other people, what would be the use of our being in the business?"

"Ar-r chee!" muttered the boy, still sore over the situation. "Youse might ha' put me wise."

Mrs. MacCormack suddenly shrieked and ran forward to Belcher's chair. The old man was toppling out of it, and would have fallen to the floor in a faint had she not caught him.

"It's been too much for him—all this excitement," said Nick Carter. "Let's put him to bed. And when you get that disguise stripped off, Chick, you can go for a doctor. I shall take off my own costume and make-up. I guess we might as well call the incident closed. The jovial owner of the lunch stand around on Jefferson Street may as well remain a mystery to the neighbors there. They may believe, if they wish, that he, as well as his stand, was destroyed by the fire."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE STORY OF HORACE BELCHER.

It was mid-afternoon when Nick Carter's car stopped at the door of the old house in Rutgers Street, which had been during the past few weeks the scene of so many strange happenings.

There disembarked from the car with the famous detective himself, Mr. Samuel Perrine, the millionaire soap manufacturer, and a gentleman belonging to the district attorney's office, who had come by special request to see and speak with the witness of the murder of Prince Arib el Hanid, Horace Belcher.

The fire around on Jefferson Street had got into the afternoon papers, and the reporters had evidently received their information regarding its origin from Tom Ratigan himself, or somebody in his confidence. The accidental beginning of the fire was admitted; but that was about the only fact that was not highly colored by the imagination of the ward politician.

In the first place, Ratigan believed that Belcher, the witness, and the mysterious Sailor, as well as the street gamin, Pop-eye, were all destroyed in the conflagration.

He declared that he had rushed into the house by the front door, after the fire had started, to try and save old Belcher, who had been remaining there since his release from the city prison on bail. The man who had kept the lunch stand, and the boy that worked for him, had run in, too. It was even intimated that there was something queer about their going into the burning house. But they had evidently been punished if their desire had been to loot the premises!

It was a fact that Belcher and the Sailor and the boy had not come out. The flames had driven everybody else back before the firemen even appeared.

Then, unfortunately, nobody told the firemen and police that there were men in the house until it was too late!

This was explained by Ratigan by the fact that he himself was so overcome by the smoke that he had been carried to his saloon unconscious. When he revived and sent to find out if the men were saved, the roof of his house was falling in, and, if there was anybody inside the walls, they had long since been destroyed.

Later, the only thing that puzzled or troubled Ratigan was that a short ladder was found in the back yard of the house—a ladder that big Bill told him looked suspiciously like the ladder leading from the top floor to the scuttle of the burned building.

However, it was evident that Ratigan believed chance had removed a most dangerous witness, and that his own connection with the murder of El Hanid was made doubtful thereby.

These facts were known to Nick's party as they entered the old Perrine house. There Pop-eye met them, for he had been forbidden by Nick to leave the house for the present, and he led them to a room in which Belcher, the erstwhile drunkard and ne'er-do-well, was sitting propped up in one of Marcus A. Perrine's ancient and expensive easy-chairs.

The doctor had seen Belcher and pronounced him ill mainly in mind, although his heart was weakened and he should not be excited as he had been of late. The old man gave a warm hand to Nick Carter when the detective entered.

"I know that I owe my life to you, Mr. Carter—and for more reasons than one," he said. "I believe Ratigan would have driven me to a drunkard's grave, if he had not positively starved me to death, had you not so generously assisted me with food from your little shop."

"But you know I had an axe to grind with you, Belcher, and I had that in mind," said Nick grimly.

"Oh, I know, sir. But that fact did not make you risk your own life in rescuing me from that burning house. Ratigan would have let me die there. He would have been glad had I been destroyed."

"Just the same, Mr. Belcher, my motive was selfish," declared Nick Carter. "Don't lose sight of that."

"Your motive does not influence me. It is the fact that you have been my friend," declared Belcher. "And if you wish me to talk before these gentlemen, I am ready and willing to do so. I will go into court and repeat such of my story as you may think vital, too."

"That's the talk!" cried Nick. "It will give me vast satisfaction to fasten on Ratigan the accusation I have made. He may not have been the prime mover in the robbery of this house, and later in the murder of Prince Arib el Hanid; but he was a party to both crimes—and perhaps to the murder of Billy Murchiston, over in Chinatown."

Belcher winced at the mention of that name.

"Perhaps I saw him around here," he murmured. "And I did not know him. Her child, too!"

"Come, Belcher," said Nick quietly, "that is the place to begin. Tell us your own story. Go back to the time you lodged with the Murchistons in that old house that was burned down this morning."

The old fellow flushed and then paled. His head dropped on his breast and he did not speak for some minutes. When he began he did not look at any of his visitors.

"That was a long time ago. But I will begin further back still. Mr. Perrine, here, will remember old Mrs. Murchiston?"

"And her daughter, too," said Sentimental Sammy, wiping his eyes.

"Ah! then you know what an angel Adele was," murmured Belcher. "She was the sweetest girl that ever breathed. Do you wonder that she could touch the heart of that old anchorite, your uncle, Mr. Perrine?"

The millionaire started, and spoke: "In a fatherly way, you mean?"

"Not at all. That would not have suited the girl's mother. Her ambition had ever been to entangle Mr. Perrine into a marriage with Adele. As a mere child she drew Adele in his way. At first Mr. Marcus Perrine looked upon the housekeeper's little girl as he looked on all children. She was merely a nuisance, and he forbade Mrs. Murchiston to have her often at the house.

"Suddenly Adele was a young woman, and as beautiful as the dawn!" added Belcher vigorously. "Mrs. Murchiston fixed it so that her employer should see her alone, and quite by surprise. He, who declared he hated every woman, fell before the charms of the innocent girl just budding into womanhood.

"In his heart he did not desire to be entangled with any woman. He tried to break the spell. He began by discharging old Murchiston and making her leave the house at once, of course, taking Adele with her.

"But your uncle, Mr. Perrine, was a pretty just man. Mrs. Murchiston had served him faithfully for years. He pensioned her and let her live in the house on Jefferson Street, directly behind his own.

"And she exercised still a sort of supervision over his own household. At least, she saw to it that he was never more comfortable in his own home. His cook was always getting drunk, and the other men were disobedient and unfaithful. Mrs. Murchiston hired the help for him herself.

"By and by she tolled him over to her house for a decent meal, such as he used to enjoy. At once he came under the spell of Adele's beauty again. She was heart-free. He was a very gallant old gentleman and he was kindness itself to her.

"But he was ashamed to be seen calling so frequently in Jefferson Street, in a house where a young woman lived. Then the old lady suggested connecting the two houses. There was an old passage between them, anyway. It only had to be enlarged.

"So Perrine fell. He began to spend his evenings with the Murchistons, and Mrs. Murchiston more frequently came over here and conducted his household as she used to, and everything was smooth again.

"Of course, he married the girl, as the old woman intended he should; but it was a quiet wedding. He was firm on that score. They went over into Jersey and spent the honeymoon at a farmhouse there, and when they came back things went on much as usual.

"He lived in his own apartments in this house, while Adele lived with her mother. The old lady did not care. She was sure her daughter had him hard and fast, and in time his property, too, would be Adele's and her children's—if she had any.

"Old Mrs. Murchiston was forehanded herself, and she let some of the rooms in the Jefferson Street house to quiet people. I was one. Worse luck!"

And Belcher groaned and shook his head, without looking at all at his interested audience.

"Mr. Perrine went away on a journey. He would not take his wife, of course. He was ashamed to have his friends know that he had such a bit of portable property, I suppose.

"However, Adele and I saw much of each other. I had no idea she was married, and she had been forbidden, both by her mother and by Perrine, to tell a soul.

"We were the best of friends. Her attitude toward me was that of a sister. It is true I loved her—loved her with all my heart and soul!" exclaimed this old wreck of humanity, the fire of his lost love burning in his eyes as he suddenly raised them to look at his audience.

"But I never took a liberty with her, nor did she show me any favor that a decent married woman might not show a friend.

"Nevertheless, when Perrine came home he had heard. He came home secretly, and entered the Jefferson Street house through the underground passage. I was sitting with Adele and her mother in the general sitting room.

"The old gentleman was beside himself with rage. He vituperated all hands. He miscalled his wife before me, and then, for the first time, I knew that she was not for me, and never could be mine!"

The old man groaned again, and hid his face in his hands for a moment. When he went on it was more softly.

"That was the end. I went away. I learned that Adele's child was born, but the old man swore if she, or her mother, tried to claim the boy as his heir, or tried to prove the marriage, he would fight them with every cent he had!

"On the other hand, as long as they kept still, he supported them all, and supported them comfortably. I learned from the old woman herself that Adele, in time, became quite insane, but was always mild and harmless—God bless her!

"Sometimes she would wander through the underground passage and go to her husband's rooms, crying and begging him to believe her. It drove the old man away from the house.

"Then she died; and after a time the old woman died. The boy must have had some inkling of who his father was, but he could not prove it. He knew something, but he had no evidence.

"That is all about that bad business, gentlemen," added Belcher, shaking his head. "Mr. Carter said you were desirous of learning the truth about Billy Murchiston. Poor boy! he's dead. If he had a claim on old Mr. Perrine, or his estate, the claim died with Billy. Of that I am sure."

Sentimental Sammy was wiping his eyes again.

"Poor little Adele Murchiston!" he murmured. "So sad a life she had! And my ill-advised uncle, too. I—I wish I might have met her boy and done the right thing by him. You shall not lose anything, Mr. Belcher, by telling me this story."

The man from the district attorney's office was growing impatient. He was after other and more important information from Belcher. And before the conference was over, Belcher had repeated and signed the copy of a statement regarding the murder of El Hanid by the man known as the Gypsy which would surely send that criminal to the electric chair.

Connected therewith, too, was testimony which proved Ratigan knew of the murder and had tried to profit by it. Nick Carter saw his case against the low-lived East Side politician firmly clinched.

"And it gives me more satisfaction than I've felt for some time," declared the detective. "At least, there will be one dirty gang out of politics this fall, a gang that has been a disgrace to all decent Ratigans, and this section of the town may see less dishonest voting than it has for some years past. It's too bad we can't clean up a few more of the leaders of such gangs of repeaters and ruffians."

Mr. Perrine was more than satisfied with the outcome of the investigation, too, and the check he sent Nick Carter amply reimbursed him for the time he had spent on the case.

In fact, about the only person who was not satisfied was young Pop-eye. He considered that he had been "done," and he had nobody to blame but himself!

"Ar-r chee!" he ejaculated to Patsy Garvan, when the latter chaffed him. "I mighter knowed dere couldn't be two men so much alike as dat guy I was woikin' for an' Mr. Carter. I was a reg'lar boob, I was. Chee!"

Nevertheless, Nick Carter assured him that he had been of much use to him in the case, and encouraged him to believe that, after all, he was a pretty observant lad. At least, Nick determined to keep his eye on the boy with the protuberant orbs and see what could be made of him in the future.

THE END.

The next number (671) will contain "Feltman, the Fence; or, Nick Carter and the Hester Street Feud."

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LUCK IN DETECTIVE WORK.

All professional criminals and most police officers and detectives are superstitious. They believe in luck. It is luck if the criminal gets away, and it is luck if he gets caught. Fortunately for society, the luck usually is against the criminal and on the side of the law.

One detective on the Scotland Yard staff was looking for a pickpocket recently, and was in a fever of impatience to get hold of the man that afternoon because it was feared he would leave town. The pickpocket could not be found at any of his usual haunts. He was known to be an enthusiastic cricketer, and the detective, who was the only man on the force who knew the offender by sight, decided at once that he was attending one of the two big matches being played that day. The detective flipped a coin to see where he should go. The coin sent the officer to Lord's, and his luck was with him. The pickpocket was located in the grand stand, and followed and taken into custody as soon as the game was over.

It is astonishingly easy to make a mistake in tracking down a criminal, and it is no disparagement to the police that a blunder, sometimes on the part of the offender, and sometimes on the part of the officer, often carries the hunter straight to the quarry. A recent instance of this kind seems almost providential. The cashier of a Birmingham merchant had been plunging on his own account, and was behind in his cash to the tune of several hundred pounds. The cashier got wind of the coming exposure, and bought a ticket for his native town in Northumberland, and left on the afternoon train. A detective was after him within two hours.

But the detective, to while away the time on the train, engaged in a game of whist with a party of commercial travelers, and before he realized it was carried two towns past the station where he was supposed to change trains. Cursing his luck, the sleuth left the train, and found by inquiries that he could not get back to the junction point for two hours.

He wandered round the village streets, and ran almost into the arms of the fugitive, who, by a cute trick, was waiting there for a train to take him westward. It is such things as this that cause detectives to believe in luck.

Some time ago an odd piece of luck enabled the London police to lay hands on a den of coiners. In a raid on a gambling saloon a young man who was known to the police was captured with the other players, and at the police station it was decided to search him just for luck. Several new florins were discovered in his pockets, and these were found to be counterfeits of the cleverest kind, being of good weight and ringing almost true.

The man was detained, and his room was searched. A quart or more of the coins were found in the bottom of his trunk, but no dies or melting pots were discovered. It was clear that the poker player was "shoving the queer" for a den of coiners. An address found in a notebook gave the police the scent, and that night the plant of the counterfeiters was discovered on the north side of the river, and the entire gang is serving time.

A notorious murderer was discovered by a lucky accident in a restaurant in London. A detective who was dining there happened to overhear a young man making inquiry of the proprietor as to the formalities necessary to secure passage for America. The detective scrutinized the man, and took him in custody on a chance that he might be a murderer who had for long eluded the police. When he was searched documents were found connecting him with the murder.

It was luck—and bad luck for him—that caused a London woman to write a message to her criminal lover with a hard pencil on a soft pad of paper. The police had been watching her for a week in a vain endeavor to discover his hiding place. They knew she was writing to him, but they never could intercept the missives. Then one day a detective found the pad on which she had just written. The sharp-pointed, hard pencil had left the address indented on the sheet below.

A police officer on the south side of the Thames discovered the body of a murdered girl some years ago because he was lucky enough to have a dog that insisted upon following him. The girl disappeared, and the whole country had been searched for her, and not the slightest trace had been discovered. The grieving mother insisted that the young woman had been murdered. The police thought that she had run away. The officer who found the body was walking across a park followed by his fox terrier, that refused to be left at home. The dog, finding the body of the unfortunate girl half buried beneath reeds and rubbish, barked so loudly that his master followed him to the spot.

CATCHING TURTLES.

A curious mode of catching turtles is practiced in the West Indies. It consists in attaching a ring and a line to the tail of a species of sucker fish known as the remora. The live fish is then thrown overboard and immediately makes for the first turtle he can spy, to which he attaches himself very firmly by means of a sucking apparatus arranged in the top of his head. Once attached to the turtle, so firm is his grip that the fishermen on drawing the line bring home both turtle and sucker.

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